

**MRS.
ALEXANDER**

KATE VERNON,
VOL. 1 (OF 3)

Mrs. Alexander

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Mrs. Alexander Kate Vernon, Vol. 1 (of 3) A Tale. In three volumes

CHAPTER I. THE BALL

The autumn of 18 – was as uncomfortable and *triste* a season as I have ever known; commerce and crops alike looked down – respectable prophets of Tory tendencies shook their heads with redoubled vigor and gloomy but intense satisfaction at the near approach of that total ruin they had so often foretold; and the unfortunate devils of starving mechanics, unable to solve the problem of depression, were raising shindies by way of relieving their minds. Under these circumstances, it pleased the Horse Guards, in the plenitude of their power and inhumanity, to banish Her Majesty's – Regiment of Light Dragoons to an infernal region of smoke and "sansculottism" situated in the west of England, and known to mortals as the wealthy and busy town of Carrington.

Here then were we hurried at the very beginning of grouse shooting, from first-rate quarters in North Britain.

Terrible was the change which came o'er all our spirits; every thing was against us; I do not believe I ever saw such rain. Byron talks about "nature's tear drops," – she gave us a shower bath! The effect of all this may be imagined. I am certain it was that fatal quarter confirmed our Major in the deep rooted love for "Kingston's old port," which finally cut him off at 65, while pretty little Mrs. Pemberton, the paymaster's wife, no longer guided in the way she should go, by fashion and the aristocracy, fell from the right path into a meeting house, and eloped with the preacher! But our rulers care little for our morals.

Au commencement, the rich manufacturers were very civil, and gave us some most enormous dinners. Their daughters, pretty girls enough, we found tolerable, as women must always be, even under the most distressing circumstances; but we had nothing to talk of to them. It was so confounding to try conversation with girls who had not a single subject in common with you; who looked on sporting as loss of time, and to whom all one's allusions, illustrations, and even good stories were an unknown tongue. Their brothers were "very awful," as Sammy Spectre says; and, when we asked the fellows to mess, they got so brutally drunk, and talked such stupid slang, we were thoroughly disgusted; so when the first terror of burnt mills and broken windows was passed, and the respectable cotton spinners, taking time to breathe, collected their scattered faculties, and remembered their dislike to the military, we were most ready to dispense with their society, and our communications were soon almost totally cut off.

Such was our position towards the beginning of September, when one morning, as I was forgetting my misfortunes in Alison's Account of the Vendean War, which in all probability I should have never read but for our unlucky change of quarters, Tom Ashley broke into my room, exclaiming, "Keep your books for a *dernier ressort* my dear fellow! Come along and get your tickets."

"For what," said I peevishly, for I am capable of acknowledging an author's magic sometimes.

"No humbug! You do not mean to say you have not read the placards announcing the Festival in the New Music Hall? Grisi, Mario, and all the rest of them. A grand mass in G, and something still grander in Z?"

"No! I know nothing about it."

"Well, know it now! There are to be three days' hard work. Sacred and scientific in the morning; profane and light in the evening; to wind up with a fancy and full dress ball on Thursday."

"Well, it is something to do, so I am *à vos ordres, mon cher*," said I, taking my hat.

We found the town full of fresh looking country faces, and, after some delay and crowding, secured our tickets. The oratorio was very like all other oratorios; the concert like all other concerts. There were airs in both that made one think some other world must exist besides this one of duns and devilry, and art and army agents. But a glance at the singers, one thought of their characters was quite enough to dispel any heavenly illusions. I have since tasted the exquisite enjoyment of hearing the lovely tones and words "I know that my Redeemer liveth," thrill from pure lips, and then I knew what music meant; but at the time of which I write I felt that any better feeling roused in me was false, both in cause and effect.

All our fellows liked music, or were used to it; but I think they were glad enough to kick their heels at the ball. I found myself there about eleven o'clock, listening to a very inspiring quadrille, and gazing at the pretty little plebs and their snobbish partners, wondering if they really could be satisfied to waste their sweetness on such specimens of humanity (for there is a natural refinement about women); and the brutes were so pre-occupied with self, so divested of that profound attention I always thought every woman expected, otherwise there was little to distinguish the gathering from a ball at Lady Y – s or Lady L – s; the lights, music, and refreshments, were first rate, the dresses handsome, many in good taste; the thing wanting was the spirit of easy enjoyment which only people sufficiently well bred to be natural dare venture on. Occupied in these philosophic reflections, I stood among a group of my brother officers, who were mingling their critiques of the morning's concert with strictures on the mob round us, when my eye was caught by a pair of fair graceful shoulders to the right in front of me; there was something indescribable in the proud deer-like carriage of the head, with its simple classic knot of chestnut brown hair, which made me almost involuntarily exclaim "That is a gentlewoman whoever she is;" and nervously anxious to see if a *nez retroussé* or *un nez noble* adorned the countenance which was hidden from me, I edged my way into a commanding but unremarkable position. It was neither, but one that harmonised well with her broad smooth forehead and short tremulous upper lip; the general expression of the face was a sort of proud yet gentle sadness, perhaps thoughtfulness is the best word. Above middle height, her easy rounded figure moved slightly and apparently unconsciously to the music, while her dress (and this I always consider a most important characteristic) was very gauzy and white, and perfectly without ornament except, indeed, a bouquet of brilliant flowers which seemed to fasten the folds over the bosom. How little does this miserable description convey the impression of grace and harmony this fair girl's countenance and figure stamped upon my mind! but I know were I to write for ever I should still be dissatisfied.

There was a *fierté* so thorough bred and yet so soft in her air, that I could have imagined her at home in the most splendid court, and what rendered this perhaps more striking, was the remarkable contrast presented by her companions.

She was leaning one arm on the back of a seat occupied by a little thin woman like a respectable housekeeper, with a fierce contrivance of lace and flowers on her head; beside her, and also behind the chair, was a plump comfortable looking man, past middle age, whose round rosy face was adorned with two little restless laughing twinkling black eyes; a large bunch of seals to a black ribbon appeared below his waistcoat in bygone style, held up in a sort of relief by the goodly protuberance below. As I glanced at these details, this last individual said something to his beautiful companion with a sort of gravity over all his face except the eyes; she bent her head gently to hear, and then her lips parted with such a smile, that I wondered I could have thought her countenance expressed pride, thought, anything, but happy merriment: such a smile must come from the heart.

"And where it most sparkled, no glance could discover In eyes, lip, or cheek, for she brightened all over."

That finished me, "I must know her, I must dance with her," I exclaimed.

"Yes, but how," said Burton, who had been watching me, "I was trying to find out who she is before you came in, and no one knows them."

"How very odd," said Ashley.

"She is so strangely unlike the people with her, and all the others," said I.

"Ah! Egerton has received a death blow."

"Command yourself my dear fellow."

"She must be Cinderella under the chaperonage of the cook and butler."

"I am determined," said I, "to know her, and *selon les règles*; for that is no young lady to treat with scant ceremony."

So saying, I took Burton's arm and moved off to try and catch one of the Stewards; we succeeded, but the savage would do nothing; "didn't like" and "could not say." So we left him; and Burton was laughingly pouring forth consolations, when I exclaimed, "I have it! I will pretend to recognise her as some acquaintance; – profound deference – many apologies &c. Eh? get up a little conversation, it requires nerve, but you know I am half Irish!"

"It requires great tact and impudence; I wish you well thro' it," said Burton gravely.

This little conversation took place near a pillar, of which there was a row, two and two, across both ends of the room, dividing it into three compartments; the centre and largest of which formed the ball room. On re-entering it we missed the group of which we were in search, and for a moment I thought that my inexorable ill-luck had sent them home; but no! I soon discovered the unmistakeable profile close to the very pillar at the other side of which we had held our consultation. "Done! by all that's unfortunate," I exclaimed. "No, no," said Burton, "it is impossible they could have overheard us, besides, they may have only just got there."

"Well, *coute qui coute*, I will venture."

"And I will watch."

The next moment I was bowing profoundly with all the grace I could muster. "I fear I am too presumptuous in hoping that you do not quite forget me."

She gazed on me at first with such a puzzled but full and steady glance from her dark clear grey eyes, that I felt ashamed of myself; then again sparkling all over with a smile and look of recognition, she held out her hand, saying quietly – "I am very stupid not to know you at once, but the moustache alters you, and it is a long time since I saw you; how is your brother?"

I was electrified – the most cutting declaration that my flimsy artifice was seen thro', could not have perplexed me more. A momentary glance showed me Burton, standing transfixed, with mouth and eyes wide open; then rallying my scattered ideas I hastened to avail myself of this happy mistake, and answered that my brother was quite well, and would be delighted to hear I had met her. She bowed. But I had a brother, could she really know him? Her next words solved the problem: "How did he like your leaving the regiment? It was so pleasant to be always together," murmuring something of submission to necessity. I begged her to join the quadrille then forming, to which, after some slight hesitation, she assented, saying to her friends, "Shall I find you here?" "Yes," said "he of the seals," as G. P. R. James would call him, "I am glad you are going to dance;" the little woman gave her a smile and a nod, and we joined the quadrille. Longing to draw her from her reminiscences which kept me in a frightful state of mind lest I should make a false step, not daring to start almost any topic lest it should betray me, I feel convinced I presented an illustration of the acme of boobyism. At length I ventured to remark that I was surprised not to have seen her at any of the oratorios; this was true at all events. "We only came over for yesterday's performances," she said, "and arriving very early we got up near the orchestra. How superb that double chorus was. I should like to have heard it in some huge dim cathedral; the theatric decorations of that concert room seemed to jar upon the eye."

"Yes! I quite agree with you; I am certain had I heard it under those circumstances I should have been ready to shave my head, tie a cord round my waist, and join the Franciscans *sur l'instant*!"

I felt more at ease – "If I can avoid my brother and the old regiment I am tolerably safe." I thought – "if I could get the smallest glimpse of who I am I should go ahead famously."

A few more sentences, broken by the movements of the dance, when my partner, returning to me, again threw me off my centre, by suddenly raising her eyes to mine with a sort of demure merriment sparkling in them, saying, "You have not enquired for any of your old friends! But, military memories are proverbially short, and yours is no exception I fear." Passing over the dangerous commencement of this speech, I launched into a glowing defence of military memories in general, and my own in particular, and wound up by entreating her to give me the fullest intelligence of all my old friends. She shook her head, "Ah! those generalities speak but badly of the kindliness of recollection I like." Good Heavens! I was getting deeper in the mire; the rich soft tones that could not be uttered by any one not possessed both of heart and intellect, seemed to sink into mine! So, hastily stammering that she did me great injustice, I reiterated my request for all the news she could impart. "I suppose you know all about the –"

"I cannot remember the numbers of regiments," said she, looking to me for the word.

"Oh! of course," said I hastily, "a copious correspondence places me pretty well *au fond*."

"Yes! but my cousin, I know you will be glad to hear though you have not the grace to ask, is still abroad, and, I hear, as beautiful as ever, and refusing all that princes and peers can offer to induce her again to try the lottery of marriage."

"Ah! the loved are not always soon forgotten," said I, trying to chime in with the tone of subdued feeling which seemed to pervade all my fair companion said. She looked at me with an air of disapprobation and replied gravely, "Notwithstanding their great disparity of years, my cousin did truly and deeply feel her husband's loss." I had better take care! could I but draw her off from her confounded cousin! At that moment she dropped her fan; I looked at it for a moment before restoring it to her; it was antique, with gold sticks, and of great value, the only part of her toilet that bespoke wealth. "You remember that fan and Lady Desmond's grand ball?" said she smiling. "Indeed I do," I exclaimed, enraptured to have learned at one *coup* that Dublin was the scene of our acquaintance and that Lady Desmond was a mutual friend. Here, however, the quadrille ended, and accepting my arm, my unknown belle turned her steps and mine, *malgré moi*, in the direction of the oft mentioned pillars, near which we had left her chaperons; but those deserving individuals had, with praiseworthy carelessness, disappeared, and my companion after looking round in vain, said, in a somewhat anxious tone, "they are certainly not here, I shall never find them again." I suggested the probability of nature requiring support, and that the refreshment room would be the most likely place in which to recover her lost guardians.

Assenting to this, and to my proposal of an ice, we were soon moving *en masse* with the other dancers towards the tea rooms, and now, freed *pro. tem.* from the incubus of cousins and brothers, whom my partner appeared to forget in her keen appreciation of the many ridiculous points in the mob around her, I felt my spirits rise to concert pitch, the embargo on my tongue removed, and, fancying myself most agreeable, the passage to the refreshment table seemed to me to be performed with miraculous rapidity. – Here, after a short inspection, we discovered the missing individuals, and hastening towards them with speed I thought rather ungracious, this puzzling, but fascinating girl, with an inclination of the head and a smile in which much suppressed mirth seemed struggling, dropped my arm and took her station beside her incongruous companions. But I was not to be so easily sent adrift; I had not served a twelve or thirteen years' apprenticeship to ball rooms to be thus dismissed if I choose to stay; so with a deferential bow, "I shall bring your ice here," said I; and rapidly securing one, I had the satisfaction of hearing her say, as I approached with it, as if in continuation of something, "knew him slightly in Dublin, a long time ago;" which, in some measure, placed me *au dessous des cartes*; for if only a slight acquaintance, I could not be expected to have very many subjects or reminiscences in common with her; so resolutely determined to stand my ground, have another dance, learn who she really was, and, if possible, lay the foundation of a future acquaintance, I took up a position beside the beautiful incognita, and ventured to discuss Ireland in a guarded and general manner, observing, with perfect truth, that two of the pleasantest years of my life had been

spent there. I could perceive a decided increase of cordiality in Miss – (what would I not have given to know the name) as I pronounced this eulogy on her native country – for I had soon guessed, by the indescribable spirit of frankness, arch, yet tempered with a certain dignity in its gay *abandon*, which pervaded her manner, that she was Irish – and just as she had turned laughingly to answer some playful charge against its characteristics, spoken apparently through a medium of mashed potatoes in his throat, by the man with the seals, Burton touched my arm, "Egerton, don't keep all your luck to yourself, introduce me."

"Hold your tongue – for Heaven's sake, my dear fellow," I exclaimed in a rapid aside – "don't breathe my name: at this moment I have not the most remote idea who I am, and am constantly on the verge of an unpardonable scrape; be silent and begone, I will tell you all afterwards." Silenced and amazed, poor Burton retired, and my unknown friend, turning to me as I stood elate at having conquered difficulties, again showed me my uncertain footing by observing – "But you used to cherish the most heretical opinions on these points, and offend me not a little by their open avowal." What an ill-bred savage she must identify me with! "Raw boys are always odious and irrational; you should not have deigned to listen to me," said I in despair.

"Oh! you were by no means a raw boy, you looked quite as old as you do now; besides, it is not half a century since we met," she replied, with another distracting look; and then – with a merry burst of apparently irrepressible laughter, in which, though I could not account for it, her friends and myself joined – it was so infectious, added – "You must forgive me, but really your reminiscences seem to be in such inextricable confusion, I cannot help laughing." In an agony lest all should be discovered – with the respectable couple before-mentioned for umpires, I urged in defence "that my memory was like the background of a picture from which one figure alone stood out clear and well defined." Then, observing that she was beating time to the sound of a most delicious waltz just begun, "Am I too unreasonable to ask for a waltz as well as a quadrille," I said. She half shook her head, then, smiling to her companions, observed – "It is so long since I had a waltz I cannot resist it; shall I keep you too late, *Caro Maestro*?" "No, no," said the lady with the cap, "we will go and watch you." In a few moments I was whirling my fair incognita round to the inspiring strains of the Elfin Waltz, then new and unhacknied.

What a delicious waltz that was! My partner seemed endowed with the very spirit of the dance: her light pliant form seemed to respond to every tone of the music, and not an unpractised *valseur* myself, I felt that I was, at all events, no encumbrance to her movements. I have never heard that waltz since – whether ground on the most deplorable of barrel organs, or blown in uncertain blasts from the watery instruments of a temperance band – without seeing, as in a magic mirror, the whole scene conjured up before my eyes: the intense enjoyment of my partner, which beamed so eloquently from her soft grey eyes, and spoke volumes of the nature it expressed: the childlike simplicity with which, when at length wearied, she stopped and said, turning to me – "You dance very well! How I have enjoyed that waltz!"

Many a stray sixpence those reminiscences have cost me! "But," she continued, "it must be late, and I cannot keep my friends any longer, let us find them as soon as possible." This was soon done, and, to my infinite chagrin, my partner declared herself quite ready to depart, pronouncing a glowing eulogium on my dancing. "You must have taken lessons since I had the pleasure of meeting you, for formerly – " There she stopped, for the philanthropic little cavalier she had called *caro maestro* interrupted her, wrapped a shawl round her, begging she would hold it to her mouth and keep that feature closed during her passage to the carriage, and led the way with his, I supposed, wife, leaving me still in possession of the little hand which had rested on my shoulder during the waltz. Now, or never, I thought.

"I fear I have induced you to prolong that waltz beyond your strength," for I felt her arm still trembling with the exertion, "you must allow me to assure myself to-morrow that you have felt no ill effects?"

"We are not staying here," she said with some hesitation; "we only came in for the festival and leave to-morrow."

Here we reached the passage, and *il caro maestro* proceeding to discover their carriage, I felt myself, of course, bound to divide my attentions with the lady of the cap, and, not choosing to prosecute my enquiries within range of her ears, I remained some time in a state of internal frying till he returned, and I was again *tête-à-tête* for a moment with their charge.

"But do you not reside in the neighbourhood?" We were close at the door. Smiling with her eyes, she shook her head, pointed to the shawl which she held to her mouth in obedience to the injunction she had received, and remained silent; I was distracted. "Forgive me," I exclaimed, "and pray speak; I must see you again."

"Come, my dear," cried my tormentor, "you'll catch cold, make haste!"

Her foot was on the step; – she was in, her guardian opposite her; – the glass drawn up. "Move on," said the policeman. One glance, as she bowed full of arch drollery, and I was left on the door step repeating, over and over, "No. 756 – 756," while my brain was in a whirl of excitement, my beautiful vision gone, and my only clue to discover her the number of a cab!

CHAPTER II. THE SEARCH

With a confused sensation of annoyance and ill temper, I opened my eyes at the *reveill * next morning, and for some moments experienced that most painful puzzle of which few in this troublesome world of ours are quite ignorant, and which is one of the accompaniments of a great grief, videlicet, a perfect certainty that you are in the middle of something disagreeable, but what you are not sufficiently wide awake to discover. The process of shaving, at all times a reflective one, soon cleared up to me the mystery, and placed in full array the pros. and cons. of my chance of ever meeting my beautiful "incognita" again. Even my decidedly sanguine disposition was compelled to acknowledge that the "pros." were few indeed. Still, as I am not without a certain degree of resolution, especially when the matter to be decided on touches my fancy or my affections, I determined pretty firmly not to relinquish the effort to discover and renew my acquaintance with the belle of last night.

I had hardly commenced an attack upon my eggs and broiled ham, when Burton walked in, brimful of curiosity, as I had anticipated, and to avoid the bore of being questioned, I at once opened my budget, and told him the whole history down to my present resolution; the more readily as he was a sufficiently high-minded gentleman-like fellow to talk to about a woman you respected; no blab, and a great chum of mine into the bargain.

I regret to say he laughed most unsympathisingly at my dilemma, and acknowledged that he had spent the greater part of the evening watching my proceedings, and speculating as to alternate expressions of triumph and defeat which swept across my countenance.

"I never heard of a more curious *rencontre*, the fair unknown must have had a very slight acquaintance with your prototype; and then your unequalled luck sending you to the right quarter for discovering the scene of the original acquaintance, and being sufficiently *au fait* at its habits and inhabitants, she could never have dreamt of having mistaken you. But how do you think of setting about her recovery?"

"Ah! there's the rub. An advertisement in the *Carrington Chronicle*— 'If the young lady with the antique fan, &c., who danced the Elfin Waltz with an officer of H.M.'s – Light Dragoons, at the ball last night, will send her address to the Cavalry Barracks, she will hear of something to her advantage,' would hardly do, eh? Besides, the admiration, however respectful, of a younger son, a landless Captain would not, I fear, come under the denomination of an advantage."

"And suppose you discover her, perhaps enshrined in some lordly old manor house, surrounded with all the prestige of position, what will you say for yourself as an excuse, for your bold attempt to see her again?"

"If I met her in one of her native mud cabins the difficulty, if it existed at all, would exist all the same for me; I feel that she is in herself equal to a ring fence of nobility. But," I continued, walking up and down the room with folded arms, the approved method of showing that stern determination, "*that* I can easily manage; I suffered too much, and felt my natural powers whatever they are, under too great a cloud from my false position last night, ever to submit myself to the same again. No, I shall boldly say that I had called to relieve my conscience by apologising for the audacity with which I had encouraged her mistake last night, but that I really had not sufficient strength of mind to deny myself the pleasure of dancing and conversing with her, and that in reward of my present endeavour to do right, I hoped she would not deny me the honour of her acquaintance; surely, the very effort to see her will be in my favour."

"Granted; *et puis*," said Burton coolly.

"For God's sake, my dear fellow, don't ask me to begin thinking of consequences *now*, for the first time in my life!"

"It strikes me, Egerton, that you are decidedly done for!"

"Not exactly. Yet I confess I would attempt and brave a good deal to hear the low tones of my nameless belle's rather remarkable voice once more. There was so much feeling in them. I am sure she sings. I fear the wish to see her is scarcely reciprocated, for I had at times a dread sensation from the bright laugh in her eye that somehow or other she was selling me. Probably she confounded me with some fool she had known formerly; flattering association! Yet, I am not without what are generally considered elements of success in the eyes of the fair sex! *Imprimis*, one dark brown curly *pow*, as our friends in the north say, two eyes ditto in tint, six feet high, and an air *distingué*. Eh! Burton, what do you say?"

"That you're an insufferable coxcomb, but the inventory is tolerably correct."

"Don't imagine that I consider the items of much value. None but inexperienced boys think that mere good looks are a passport to the heart of any woman that's worth having. We love beauty exclusively; but there is not a woman with an ounce of truth in herself that will not be instinctively attracted to a manly straightforward fellow, be he ever so plain; and, if he show her devotion, give him her whole heart as readily as if he was Apollo and Adonis all in one!"

"Hum," said Burton, "perhaps so; but to business. How do you intend to proceed?"

"First, to discover cab 756, and, from its interesting charioteer, learn at what hotel the objects of my search put up; there they will know their names."

"Suppose they were at a private house with friends."

"Pshaw! Suppose they had lodgings in the moon! Did I not tell you the young lady expressly said they were perfect strangers?"

"That might be *façon*."

"Burton! Another objection and you may look out for squalls! It is my only plan, so be silent."

"When do you set out upon the search?"

"This morning, while the memory of Jehu may be fresh; the moment parade is over."

"Shall we hunt in couples?"

"No, my dear fellow; in such a pursuit you would founder at the first fence."

"I confess my heart and soul are not in the business, so I might be an obstacle; besides – but there's the trumpet; adieu! May success attend you, and the spirit of a thousand detectives inspire you."

Parade over, I hastened to doff my uniform, and with a delightful sensation of excitement, which I never imagined I could experience in the depressed atmosphere of Carrington, I sallied forth on my quest, with a spirit of perseverance, which, if there be any truth in ancient proverbs, augured well for the accomplishment of my object. As usual in that horrid locality, the weather was "dimmed dimp and disagreeable," as Mantilini says, and not more than three or four cabs on the first stands I passed; none of these sported the magic figures; while the innumerable ones which were in motion, seemed by some perverse and unaccustomed freak to drive with such unprecedented rapidity, that though keen of sight, I could not distinguish their numbers. After perambulating the town in all its intricacies, visiting every cab stand extant, within its compass, standing numerous charges from the vehicles themselves, and a terrific amount of slang, with the steadiness of the 42nd at Waterloo, I found myself towards five o'clock much in the same position as at starting. What! if my beautiful unknown should really have vanished from my sight for ever; and No. 756, a modernised edition of Cinderella's magic coach, be disenchanted into its original form of a vegetable marrow, the nearest approach, I believe, we have to a pumpkin! And Burton too! – he must be put down! Here a very dissipated looking cab crawled slowly by, drawn by a groggy horse, his bones showing in sharp angles through the oil cloth thrown over his back with a mockery of care, and driven by a small man with a face like a crumpled crab apple, and a hat in a galloping consumption. 755, "Come," I thought, "that's within one of my number; 755 ought to know something about 756." I elevated my cane. "Here you are, sir," the door was opened. "Stop," said I, "you look intelligent," for an immense amount of

knowingness twinkled or rather floated in his watery red eyes, "and will perhaps assist me in a search I am making. Can you tell me where I shall find cab number 756? I have been looking on the cab stands all day, and about the streets and cannot see it any where; every other number almost have I seen, but 756 is invisible."

"756," said Jehu reflectively, and gazing sharply at me, "knows no such number, no such cab; cos why, sir, 756 was done for four months ago, and has he was unfort'nate, no one liked to take the cab – so its hoff the stans!"

Good Heavens! then was it a phantom conveyance? In deep disappointment I stepped in, saying "to the cavalry barracks." Instead of clapping the door with the usual jerk, the crumpled driver stood there, his face going through a perfect series of expressive wrinklins; at last, with an effort and a knock of his forefinger against the brim of his decaying hat, "P'raps you're a hofficer, a sojer officer, sir?"

"Yes," said I, rather surprised, "my regiment is quartered here."

"Ho! very good, sir! I thought as you were a detective hofficer, sir; no offence, sir?"

"Certainly not," said I, highly flattered at the mistake, "but why?"

"Cos, sir, you wanted so hard to get 756? I thinks he 'as summat against him, only you asked questions too straight forrard like; I know nothink about 756, we don't know much of each other, 'less we're on the same stan'; only of course, if you was a detective, I wouldn't peach."

"I assure you," said I, "I only wanted some information from 756, for which I would have rewarded him, and if you will help me – "

"I know, sir! Why you see if you've been a looking for him all day and asked on all the stans – "

"I did," said I.

"And could hear nothink, he'll not be on the drive, a good many numbers b'long to the 'otels, sir."

A glorious idea by Jove! of course they were at an Hotel! "You shall drive me round to them all," said I, "till we find him."

"And if that won't do," said my inimitable mentor, "You can summons him, the police will soon get him."

He slammed the door with a triumphant wink that beggars description, and off we went at a wonderful pace.

Many were the hostelries we visited, but in vain, Red, Blue, and White Lions, Hen and Chickens, Boars, Bears, Bulls, and even Nag's Heads; the entire animal creation, ignored the existence of "756."

"Least ways, sir," said my invaluable assistant, between whom and myself, a great degree of confidence had sprung up, as he prepared for the fiftieth time to mount the box. "Least ways, sir, we've done our best; you've been to all the 'otels as is good enough to keep cabs 'cept two, the 'Cat and Garters,' that's a poor 'un, and the 'Hangel' that's nearly as good as the 'Adelphi.'"

"To the Angel first then."

Arrived there, I went into the bar, and in the politest manner, asked its presiding goddess, if "756" was enrolled amongst the cabs of the establishment. "Can't say, sir; here, 'Enry," – the waiter came forward – "756 – sir! yes sir!" said the man unmovedly, little imagining the delight with which I heard his reply. I looked at my watch, seven o'clock, "let me have dinner in a private room," said I, and after fully satisfying my most admirable Jehu, I returned to the charge within.

"This way, sir," said the waiter, with a waive of the hand – I followed.

"Light a fire, it is very damp."

"Yes, sir."

In a few moments, a rosy cheeked chambermaid came in with a coal box and et ceteras, for a fire. This was what I wanted, – I drew a chair near, and after some observations on the weather,

passed on to the probable numbers putting up at the house for last night's ball. "Lots of pretty girls from the country," I concluded.

"Yes, sir, we are still very full, though a good many left this morning."

"Indeed! I danced with a young lady last night, who was staying here, but I cannot remember her name, I want very much to find it out, – do you think if I were to describe her to you, you could tell me?"

"P'raps I might, sir; though often we don't know the names of the people who stop here occasionally."

"Well, this young lady was tall, and very fair, with brown hair, and a very pleasant smile."

"I scarcely think I know any particular young lady like that, sir; there's Miss Jones, and Miss Mary Peters, and Miss Majoribanks, Squire Majoribanks' daughter, all just like that, sir."

Confound it, my description would have suited three-fifths of the young ladies of great Britain.

"Yes, yes, but the lady I mean was with an old fattish man, black eyes, and thick voice, and a little elderly woman, who –"

"Oh, I think I know, sir: she had a little brown mole on her cheek, near the chin. A beautiful young lady!"

"Exactly," I exclaimed in delight.

"They were only here two nights, and I don't know the name at all; they were quite strangers."

How intensely annoying! "But is there no one in the house has an idea?"

"Well, I can't say, sir; you see we have been so busy; if it is any one it will be Bill, one of the cabmen, sir, he took them somewhere this morning; and I think they come from A – , but I'm not sure."

Here she began to gather her sticks and coals, and the waiter entered to lay the cloth.

"Is Bill in?" said I – "If so, send him up without fail immediately after dinner." "He is out just now, sir." "Well, the moment he comes in, whether I have finished dinner or not."

"Yes, sir," said both in chorus, and excited.

I had dined, and was languidly examining the interior of a tart, when the waiter entered again, announcing that "Bill was there, if I wanted him." "Show him in, by all means:" and Bill made his appearance, hat in hand, and stroking down his hair.

"Oh, good evening: your name is Bill, I understand, and I fancy you can tell me something I want to find out: – You drove a party from this hotel somewhere this morning, and I want to know their names: there was a little old lady, and a tall young one, with a short fat man, twinkling black eyes, eh! do you remember them?"

"Yes, I think I does," said Bill, slowly, as if confused by my rapid description, "fat short gen'lman, spoke thickish, I remember; called my horse a rough sketch – not filled up."

"Precisely; that's him, I am sure: what was the name?"

"Can't say, sir; I tuck 'em to the railway station: they was a-goin' to A – ."

"How do you know?" "Why, as I was a-putting of the luggage into a truck at the station, a porter turns one of 'em up, and says – this is for A – , not Manchester: and puts it all into another truck; and then I just see a name beginning with a W, and that was all, as I'd to come back direct, for there's been a sight of work this week."

"Then none of you can tell me the name of that gentleman?"

"No, sir, they was quite strangers."

"Sorry to have troubled you; there – ."

"No trouble sir, thank you sir."

Well, thought I, this is small success; still, it is better than nothing, and is a beginning. I'll keep up my courage, and take an early train to A – to-morrow; I have often heard it is worth seeing, so first for my bill, and then for Burton.

The first was soon settled, and a short drive placed me in the barracks, where, not a little wearied with the day's tramp, I speedily luxuriated in dressing-gown and slippers, and detailed to Burton the wonderful perseverance and sagacity with which I had hunted up the track. "At all events, old fellow, I've got the *locale*; the opening is decidedly propitious, and to-morrow I start for A – ; you shall hear the result on my return; for, as I am on duty, I must, I suppose, be back the same night. I can't ask you to take it again after to-day, but Sedley, or some one will." "Well," said Burton, "you deserve success, but what will you do when you get to A – ? Go to every house and describe your incognita? – or ask for a list of the inhabitants, and hunt up every name that begins with W? Certainly the Commander-in-Chief has a great deal to answer for in exposing H.M.'s officers to the dangers of such a quarter, where the dearth of all natural occupations and amusements drives them to Fouché-ism. I would offer to go with you, but that I promised Sedley to go over to – , just to have a look at M's mare, for after all he has entered Diana for the Cup, and I rather have a fancy to back her.

"Oh never mind! you know, old boy, in a hunt of this kind, I think that safety or success does not consist in numbers; I'll take my sketch book, though I've almost forgotten how to hold a pencil since we came to this infer – , but I hear a row on the stairs; oblige me, my dear Burton, by not mentioning my search nor its object to any of our fellows, if you've not done so already; they are accustomed to my occasional artistic fits, when I cut you all, and" —

"I'm dumb," said Burton, "only don't have one in reality, for you grow too philosophic to be companionable."

As he spoke the door opened, and half a dozen noisy subs burst in to carry us off to Sedley's room, where devilled kidneys and Roman punch finished the evening.

CHAPTER III. THE RENCONTRE

THE quaint old cathedral town of A – is some twenty-five miles from Carrington, and often an excursion-point to the inhabitants of the latter, as an excellent hotel rendered them tolerably secure of a good dinner. I had often threatened a sketching visit to it, which bad weather, and a strict routine of duty, in consequence of the expected disturbances, had hitherto prevented my fulfilling. It was, therefore, with no common alacrity I started on my expedition, armed with a large sketch book, which bid defiance to the suspicion of my brother officers. The weather though gloomy was no longer wet, and a walk of about half a mile brought me from the railway to the walls of the old city. Rough, red, and weather beaten, they, at the first glance, showed many a point equally available to a draughtsman or an enemy. Once considered almost impregnable, they are now chiefly valued as a dry and pleasant promenade for the citizens. I am no great antiquarian, but I believe those splendid old Romans, who have supplied all Europe with interesting relics, are accountable for the original foundation of A – . Various princes and potentates have added their endeavours, and at present it is, perhaps, the most picturesque old town in England.

At each step I took, some delicious carved gable or galleried front, overhung the street, mingled with modernised shops, it is true; yet as a whole, charming to my eye, of late accustomed only to the unmitigated squareness of modern brick and modern iron, accompanied, as they are at Carrington, by all the abominations of *soi disant* civilisation without one of its beauties.

Over all rose with a grave paternal air the Abbey towers, which seemed to infect the atmosphere of the place with a calm ecclesiastical repose well suited to its aspect; these general views I took in while pursuing my way towards the principal hotel, where I intended to put up more as an excuse for pushing my enquiries than for any other reason. During my way thither, diverted by the various sketchable points I constantly passed, the immense difficulties of my search did not so strikingly present themselves, till, entering the hotel I called for the landlord and the *carté*, and endeavoured to describe the man with the seals as a most agreeable individual whose acquaintance I wished to renew, but could only remember the first letter of his name; mine host was impenetrable, he knew many who answered to my description; but none I was likely to have met: there was Wilkins, the first butcher in the city; Wiggins, the tobacconist; Dr. Worthington, a highly respectable chemist; Mr. White, the methodist parson? No, no, it could be none of these. What! my beautiful incognita under the chaperonage of a butcher, a tobacconist, or a chemist. The landlord was departing, when a sudden spasm of memory seemed to seize him, "Could it be Winter? There was a very pleasant gentleman of that name lived in the Abbey garden; he painted pictures, grand pictures, and had a nice farm in right of his wife?" "Was he a gentleman?" "Oh yes, he used often to dine at the Dean's, and sometimes with the Bishop. Mr. Winter was thought a deal of?"

"Perhaps Winter was the name; well I will try. Let me have dinner at six, and now for the Abbey."

I spent two or three hours very agreeably in exploring the aisles and passages and beautiful choir of this irregular but impressive old pile, feeling the deep effect which may be produced by the simple sense of weight and size. The Town Hall, quaint enough, a subterranean chapel, the remains of the castle and a Roman bath, made up the sum of sight seeing, and still I pondered on the chances of "Winter" turning out to be the veritable "man with the seals." I walked on the walls and saw Prince Rupert's and King Charles' towers, and finally asked my way to the Abbey garden; it was a good sized square, near the Cathedral, full of substantial houses, and walking round I saw the name of J. Winter on the hall door of one of them. Should I knock? No, for that beautiful girl was not their daughter; indeed she seemed to exercise more authority over them than they over her, and I should

only land myself in a scrape, perhaps lose by precipitancy. "No, I will not knock, but like the sage captain in 'Ali Baba or the Forty Thieves,' I will mark the house, and next week being off duty, take up my abode, sketch book, and all in the old city for a few days; and 'the Devil's in the dice,' as poor O'Brien of the 88th used to say, if I do not make the plump little artist's acquaintance before they are over." Thus resolving, I again turned to the walls, which here approached a river sufficiently broad and winding for beauty, though not for grandeur. This was the only side at which the town appeared to overflow the limits of its walls; but here a straggling and inconsiderable suburb stretched for a short distance, and even one unusually large church, with a lofty detached tower, seemed to have burst bounds and sought the vicinity of the river, towards which the ground sloped rather abruptly, and was altogether lower than that within the walls, from which a flight of rude steps led to the road beneath. A few remarkably fine old trees, a broken rocky red bank, scarcely high enough to be dignified with the name of cliff, at the other side of the river, with undulating meadows, and a distant line of blue hills beyond, made up a scene of much unpretending beauty. I gazed at it long with quiet pleasure, anticipating my *séjour* among its attractions, and trying to persuade myself I had much better give up the pursuit I had embarked in with such ardour. "One throw more," said I half aloud, "and if this Winter does not turn out to be my man of the seals, I'll give it up; though by all the saints that adorn that old gateway, it would be for the good of my soul to see those eyes and hear that voice again; but pshaw! I've been in love before and found it not insurmountable, and now I am not in love, only curious." And with this wise conclusion I ate my dinner and returned to Carrington, where I was met by Burton's rather anxious, "Well, what success?" "Why, not much, but I am going over next week." – He smiled.

A few days after, I fulfilled my intention, and installed myself and a formidable array of sketching materials at the Royal; and about noon the following day sallied forth to revisit the walls where they command the view which had so much pleased me. Proceeding leisurely along the thinly peopled streets, my eye was caught by a figure in strong contrast to all that had hitherto passed me; it was that of an old gentleman, tall, erect, and still vigorous; the greatest symptom of his age being the perfect whiteness of the profuse hair which curled, or rather waved, under his hat; the old fashioned buff waistcoat, blue coat, and gilt buttons, together with his colored cravat and frilled shirt, had an air of perfect freshness, making a *tout ensemble* thorough-bred and remarkable. An expression of easy benevolence sat on his aquiline and aristocratic features, and his bright blue eyes had an eagle look, not unmingled with humour. While I gazed unobservedly, for he was at the opposite side of the street, the countenance grew strangely familiar to me, and in a moment a curtain seemed, as it were, raised from my memory, and scenes in which we had both been actors stood before me with all the startling vividness that sometimes invests circumstances which the rush of life jostle for a while into hidden nooks of memory, where they are preserved, as it were, by darkness, from loss of their pristine colors.

Some ten years before, a raw stripling, I joined my regiment, when quartered in a singularly remote and beautiful district in the west of Ireland, where still, though much diminished, some remnants of the old national custom of duelling remained, chiefly among the inferior gentry. At a large gathering of the magnates and smaller fry too, some anniversary dinner, it was my ill-fate to get into an absurd dispute, which a little manly self-command would have soon concluded, but which the impetuosity and inexperience of boyhood rapidly fanned into a promising quarrel; my antagonist, a man sufficiently qualified by birth to associate with gentlemen, had not as yet by character quite forfeited the claim, so that affairs soon wore an unpleasant aspect. With heightened complexion and quickening pulse, stung by his insolent assumption of superior experience, I was imperiously reiterating some not very amiable opinion; when a gentleman of striking appearance begged, with polished courtesy, to know the subject in dispute, a mere trifle, the folly of which struck me as I explained it; then in few words, and with the consummate tact of a man of feeling, as well as of the world, backed by a tone of kindly authority his dignified appearance fully warranted, he stilled our dispute without one scratch to the *amour propre* of either party. Presenting himself as Colonel D'Arcy

Vernon, he begged to have the pleasure of knowing me, adding, with a few laughing words on my impetuosity, "There is something in your spirit I can well sympathise with, and I hope you will do me the favour to accompany your brother officers, Captain Dashwood and Mr. Hauton, whom I expect next week for a little shooting at Dungar." I readily accepted; and often, while the regiment remained in that part of the world, enjoyed the hospitality of Dungar, and the real pleasure of Colonel Vernon's society. Of a high family, which formerly possessed an immense territory, now sadly dwindled, he had only just retired from the command of the County Militia, having never held higher rank than that of Captain in the Army. When I last saw him, though no longer keeping hounds, his house was a model of all that was most agreeable and luxurious, notwithstanding unpleasant remarks as to the incumbrances of his estates, rife almost at his own table.

To return from this long digression. Colonel Vernon had always held an indisputable place in my memory, not only for the kindness and pleasure I had received from him, but as a model of chivalrous courtesy. With the utmost amazement I now recognised him, and determined to renew an acquaintance; crossing the street with this intention, just as I reached him, a passing workman jostled him rudely and shook his gold headed cane from his grasp; seizing this opportunity for accosting him, I stooped for the cane and restored it to him. Raising his hat, and bowing with *sauve* grace, he said, "Sir, you are very good, I am extremely obliged to you."

I bowed, smiled, and still standing in front of him, said, "I fear sir you have forgotten my name as well as my face, nevertheless, Fred. Egerton, of the – Dragoons, is most happy to see Colonel Vernon looking as well as he did ten years ago."

"Egerton, God bless my soul! so it is. My dear boy, I am truly glad to see you. I remember you perfectly, and 'gad, it takes ten years from my life to see you again."

And we were shaking hands with a forty-horse power of cordiality; then turning with me he took my arm.

"But what lucky wind has blown you here, Egerton?"

"Why, we are quartered at Carrington, and I am here on a sketching expedition; imagine my surprise and pleasure at recognising you in about the last place in the world I should have anticipated such a rencontre; but tell me, how goes the world at beautiful Dungar?"

I felt a sudden pressure on my arm, "Ah! my dear Egerton, I really do not know; poor Dungar has not been mine for several years; in short, I am living very quietly here; and having led the usual life of an Irish proprietor, short and sweet, I am now atoning for it; though God forgive the word, I am very happy, and you must come and dine with me in my crib, small as it is, for by gad I am very glad to see you, though till you spoke I did not recognise you, you have grown so dark and, I fancy, taller."

"And your little granddaughter? Was there not one with you in Ireland, a pretty fair-haired child, who was always in mischief?" "Yes, yes," said he with a pleasant sparkle of the eye, "I'll introduce you to her." Talking copiously of past times and people, sometimes laughing at some droll reminiscence, sometimes glancing off from topics I could see made my companion wince, he directed my steps towards an old gateway, passing through which we pursued a narrow lane, between two rows of ancient red stone houses, opening on a road which I recognized, by a flight of steps descending from the city wall and the large old church in front, to be the same I had observed on my first visit. A low wall surrounded the church yard, in which were few graves, a great deal of grass, and several venerable yew trees; altogether a good sized enclosure. We entered it through a wrought-iron gate, of curiously ancient workmanship, standing between two large yew trees, and wide open; opposite to which a low deep arch of vast thickness showed the church door within. A square and lofty tower rose beside the church, independently, from the ground, at the western extremity where we entered; and the edifice itself, ponderous looking and most picturesquely irregular, stretched out for a considerable distance.

Following my companion by the path along the side of the church, and listening to and answering his observations, my eye took in, without an effort, these details, and reaching the east end, I perceived that much of this portion of the building was in ruins, although the exterior walls

were still in tolerable preservation; several branches of trees waved over them, and here was a small but perfect round arch, surmounted by some old Gothic inscription I had not time to decipher, and filled up by a green wicket clenched with nails, which my kind old friend pushed open, and, shaking me by the hand, welcomed me to his new but diminutive territory with true Irish warmth, and yet with a tinge of melancholy. I could only return his pressure in silence, as I stood enchanted with the beauty of the spot into which I was ushered.

This end of the building had, as I have said, fallen into decay, and the present east window was some fifty yards within the old one, and peeped out through the feathery foliage of a splendid ash and several acacias, which grew almost against it, while the rugged red wall was covered with ivy and other creepers. The little enclosure formed by the ruined walls was divided in two by a row of three low ornamented arches, somewhat broken, and beyond these rose clear against the sky the lace-like tracery of the old window, much of which remained, together with the remnant of a round tower.

At the side where we entered, a magnificent spreading elm filled the inner enclosure with grace and shade, and both were carpeted with the greenest, softest grass; a few red and white roses mixed with evergreens adorning the larger of the two enclosures, and a straight neatly gravelled walk led to a door opposite, half glass, the entrance to a red stone cottage forming one side of the quadrangle; a time-worn Madonna and Child and a quaint-looking and rather plump Saint, saying his prayers, stood sentry right and left of this humble portal, advancing to which the Colonel rung the bell, observing, "You admire this? Kate will be enchanted; it was the Vicar's residence, but the present man is too great for so small a place, and lets me rent it This is not a common church, but managed I do not quite know how. They call it St. Augustine's Priory, and this cottage is known as the Priory House."

As the door opened, "Walk in; is Miss Kate at home, Nelly?"

This question was addressed to the servant, a fat dignified old lady in black, with an apron and cap of irreproachable whiteness; there was a volume of character in her rather wide mouth, slightly drawn at the corners, and the decided *nez retroussé* bespoke a somewhat sharp temper.

"No, sir, she tuck a roll of music, and Cormac went with her; I dare say she'll be in soon."

"Well, we'll wait for her," said Vernon, "but by the bye, Nelly, don't you remember this gentleman at all? he used to be often at Dungar."

"Why, now," she returned with a keen glance; "I *disremember*; sure there was thousands of them, all with hair on their faces, just like his honour; but at all ivints ye're heartily welcome, sir, for its seldom I see a gentleman, barring the masther." Bowing and thanking her for the compliment, I followed Colonel Vernon across a little square arched hall, its only light derived from the glass door, to one opposite, leading into a pretty modern room, to which a bow window, occupying one entire side, gave light and space; it looked into a small pleasure ground where towered an ancient and gigantic oak, beyond which the bank sloped steeply to the river, winding blue and peaceful at its foot. The room was redolent of heliotrope and mignonette, and gay with brilliant dahlias, fuchsias, and, though late in the season, roses; a pianoforte, some worked chairs, and a print of John Anderson my Joe, then not quite so common as now, over the mantle-piece, were the only articles in the room at all removed from the simplest and commonest style of furniture. Yet a spirit of grace and refinement pervaded all its arrangements, and breathed, I know not what of purity and peace, into its atmosphere. All this time I was expressing my admiration of his domicile to my friend, the Colonel, who was evidently delighted by my encomiums. "Yes," he said, "quiet and snug, this and the dining room were additions by a wealthy rector some thirty years ago, but the little hall was formerly an entrance into a large confessional or penitentiary, and so was the outer gate leading to it; Kate can tell the whole story; I know it very imperfectly. By the way, what has become of that curious fellow with the stutter, that used always to forget the most essential part of every story?"

And we again plunged into reminiscences; half an hour must have elapsed, and I was just meditating some enquiries as to the existence in A – , of a party such as I had met at Carrington, when something scratched at the door; the handle turned, it opened, and in walked, in shawl and bonnet,

but in unmistakeable *propriâ personâ*, my beautiful incognita, my nameless partner, the object of my search! followed by a huge majestic looking dog, shaggy and stern. I had risen as the door opened, and now stood transfixed, while the lady started, and blushed to the eyes.

"Kate, my love," said her grandfather, "let me present Captain Egerton, an old acquaintance of mine."

"And of mine too, grandpapa," she replied, with a smile indescribably arch, and recovering herself completely, "I had the pleasure of meeting Captain Egerton last week at Carrington, and it appears we had known each other long ago."

"Oh! was this the gentleman; how extraordinary," and he laughed most heartily.

Recovering my self-possession, I said, "I have been most anxious to apologise for encouraging your mistake the other evening, and came to A – in the vague hope of discovering you for that purpose; but since Colonel Vernon is, I see, acquainted with the affair, he will, I am certain, admit the temptation was irresistible."

"Faith I do, boy! but there was no mistake at all."

"How?" I asked, again plunged in bewilderment.

"Speak for yourself, Miss Kate," said the old gentleman.

"Indeed, Captain Egerton," began Kate with a bright blush and merry laugh, "I scarce know how to excuse my escapade; first you must know it was rather a sudden thought of my kind chaperons to go to the ball, and, knowing no one, we merely meant to look at the proceedings and return. We were standing near a pillar, and I was thinking how I would like to dance, when my attention was attracted by some one exclaiming, rather loudly, 'I have it; I'll pretend to recognise an acquaintance; – profound deference; get up a little conversation, eh?' I could not help smiling at the scheme, and, wishing to witness its *dénouement*, you may imagine my surprise, when a few minutes after you addressed me. I knew your voice; and, as you spoke, it glanced across my mind that it would be pleasant to dance, and better still to punish you with your own device by pretending to remember you. I was fully satisfied, for though a little nervous at first, I soon gathered confidence from your frequent confusion. How I wish, dear grandpapa, you could have heard our conversation; I do not think I ever was more amused; but, Captain Egerton, you certainly played your part with infinite tact, and sometimes, grandpapa, whenever he grew too much at his ease, I used to throw him into confusion by some question or allusion that utterly puzzled him." Then turning to me, "You must promise to forgive, and not think me very wild, but the temptation to retaliate was irresistible!"

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