

HENRY WOOD

THE STORY OF CHARLES
STRANGE. VOL. 1 (OF 3)

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Mrs. Henry Wood

The Story of Charles

Strange: A Novel. Vol. 1 (of 3)

CHAPTER I.

EARLY DAYS

I, CHARLES STRANGE, have called this my own story, and shall myself tell a portion of it to the reader; not all.

May was quickly passing. The drawing-room window of White Littleham Rectory stood open to the sunshine and the summer air: for the years of warm springs and long summers had not then left the land. The incumbent of the parish of White Littleham, in Hampshire, was the Reverend Eustace Strange. On a sofa, near the window, lay his wife, in her white dress and yellow silk shawl. A young and lovely lady, with a sweet countenance; her eyes the colour of blue-bells, her face growing more transparent day by day, her cheeks too often a fatal hectic; altogether looking so delicately fragile that the Rector must surely be blind not to suspect the truth. *She* suspected it. Nay, she no longer suspected; she knew. Perhaps it was that he would not do so.

"Charley!"

I sat at the end of the room in my little state chair, reading a new book of fairy tales that papa had given me that morning. He was as orthodox a divine as ever lived, but not strait-laced, and he liked children to read fairy tales. At the moment I was deep in a tale called "Finetta," about a young princess shut up in a high tower. To me it was enchanting.

"Yes, mamma."

"Come to me, dear."

Leaving the precious book behind me, I crossed the room to the sofa. My mother raised herself. Holding me to her with one hand, she pushed with the other the hair from my face and gazed into it. That my face was very much like hers, I knew. It had been said a hundred times in my hearing that I had her dark-blue eyes and her soft brown hair and her well-carved features.

"My pretty boy," she said caressingly, "I am so sorry! I fear you are disappointed. I think we might have had them. You were always promised a birthday party, you know, when you should be seven years old."

There had been some discussion about it. My mother thought the little boys and girls might come; but papa and Leah said, "No—it would fatigue her."

"I don't mind a bit, mamma," I answered. "I have my book, and it is so pretty. They can come next year, you know, when you are well again."

She sighed deeply. Getting up from the sofa, she took up two books that were on the stand behind her, and sat down again. Early in the spring some illness had seized her that I did not understand. She ought to have been well again by this time, but was not so. She left her room and came downstairs, and saw friends when they called: but instead of growing stronger she grew weaker.

"She was never robust, and it has been too much for her," I overheard Leah say to one of the other servants, in allusion to the illness.

"What if I should not be here at your next birthday, Charley?" she asked sadly, holding me to her side as she sat.

"But where should you be, mamma?"

"Well, my child, I think—sometimes I think—that by that time I may be in heaven."

I felt suddenly seized with a sort of shivering. I neither spoke nor cried; at seven years old many a child only imperfectly realizes the full meaning of anything like this. My eyes became misty.

"Don't cry, Charley. All that God does must be for the best, you know: and heaven is a better world than this."

"Oh, mamma, you must get well; you must!" I cried, words and tears bursting forth together. "Won't you come out, and grow strong in the sunshine? See how warm and bright it is! Look at the flowers in the grass!"

"Ay, dear; it is all very bright and warm and beautiful," she said, looking across the garden to the field beyond it. "The grass is growing long, and the buttercups and cowslips and blue-bells are all there. Soon they will be cut down and the field will be bare. Next year the grass and the flowers will spring up again, Charlie: but we, once we are taken, will spring up no more in this world: only in heaven."

"But don't you think you *will* get well, mamma? Can't you *try* to?"

"Well, dear—yes, I will try to do so. I *have* tried. I am trying every day, Charley, for I should not like to go away and leave my little boy."

With a long sigh, that it seemed to me I often heard from her now, she lay for a moment with her head on the back of the sofa and closed her eyes. Then she sat forward again, and took up one of the books.

"I meant to give you a little book to-day, Charley, as well as papa. Look, it is called 'Sintram.' A lady gave it me when I was twelve years old; and I have always liked it. You are too young to understand it yet, but you will do so later."

"Here's some poetry!" I cried, turning the leaves over. The pleasure of the gift had chased away my tears. Young minds are impressionable—and had she not just said she would try to get well?

"I will repeat it to you, Charley," she answered. "Listen."

"Repeat it?" I interrupted. "Do you know it by heart?—all?"

"Yes, all; every line of it."

"When death is drawing near,
And thy heart sinks with fear,
And thy limbs fail,
Then raise thy hands and pray
To Him who cheers the way,
Through the dark vale.

"See'st thou the eastern dawn?
Hear'st thou, in the red morn,
The angels' song?
Oh! lift thy drooping head,
Thou who in gloom and dread
Hast lain so long.

"Death comes to set thee free;
Oh! meet him cheerily,
As thy true friend;
And all thy fears shall cease,
And in eternal peace
Thy penance end.'

You see, Charley, death comes not as a foe, but as a friend to those who have learnt to look for him, for he is sent by God," she continued in a loving voice as she smoothed back my hair with her gentle hand. "I want you to learn this bit of poetry by heart, and to say it sometimes to yourself in future years. And—and—should mamma have gone away, then it will be pleasant to you to remember that the angels' song came to cheer her—as I know it will come—when she was setting out on her journey. Oh! very pleasant! and the same song and the same angel will cheer your departure, my darling child, when the appointed hour for it shall come to you."

"Shall we *see* the angel?"

"Well—yes—with the eye of faith. And it is said that some good people have really seen him; have seen the radiant messenger who has come to take them to the eternal shores. You will learn it, Charley, won't you—and never forget it?"

"I'll learn it all, every verse; and I will never forget it, mamma."

"I am going to give you this book, also, Charley," she went on, bringing forward the other. "You—"

"Why, that's your Bible, mamma!"

"Yes, dear, it is my Bible; but I should like it to be yours. And I hope it will be as good a friend to you as it is now to me. I shall still use it myself, Charley, for a little while. You will lend it me, won't you? and later, it will be all your own."

"Shall you buy another for yourself, then?"

She did not answer. Her face was turned to the window; her yearning eyes were fixed in thought upon the blue sky; her hot hands were holding mine. In a moment, to my consternation, she bent her face upon mine and burst into a flood of tears. What I should have said or done, I know not; but at that moment my father came swiftly out of his study, into the room. He was a rather tall man with a pale, grave face, very much older than his wife.

"Do you chance to remember, Lucy, where that catalogue of books was put that came last week? I want—"

Thus far had he spoken, when he saw the state of things; both crying together. He broke off in vexation.

"How can you be so silly, Lucy—so imprudent! I will not have it. You don't allow yourself a chance to get well—giving way to these low spirits! What is the matter?"

"It is nothing," she replied, with another of those long sighs. "I was talking a little to Charley, and a fit of crying came on. It has not harmed me, Eustace."

"Charley, boy, I saw some fresh sweet violets down in the dingle this morning. Go you and pick some for mamma," he said. "Never mind your hat: it is as warm as midsummer."

I was ready for the dingle, which was only across the field, and to pick violets at any time, and I ran out. Leah Williams was coming in at the garden gate.

"Now, Master Charles! Where are you off to? And without your hat!"

"I'm going to the dingle, to get some fresh violets for mamma. Papa said my hat did not matter."

"Oh," said Leah, glancing doubtfully at the window. I glanced too. He had sat down on the sofa by mamma then, and was talking to her earnestly, his head bent. She had her handkerchief up to her face. Leah attacked me again.

"You've been crying, you naughty boy! Your eyes are wet still. What was that for?"

I did not say what: though I had much ado to keep the tears from falling. "Leah," I whispered, "do you think mamma will get well?"

"Bless the child!" she exclaimed, after a pause, during which she had looked again at the window and back at me. "Why, what's to hinder it?—with all this fine, beautiful warm weather! Don't you turn fanciful, Master Charley, there's a darling! And when you've picked the violets, you come to me; I'll find a slice of cake for you."

Leah had been with us about two years, as upper servant, attending upon mamma and me, and doing the sewing. She was between twenty and thirty then, an upright, superior young woman, kind in the main, though with rather a hard face, and faithful as the day. The other servants called her Mrs. Williams, for she had been married and was a widow. Not tall, she yet looked so, she was so remarkably thin. Her gray eyes were deep-set, her curls were black, and she had a high, fresh colour. Everyone, gentle and simple, wore curls at that time.

The violets were there in the dingle, sure enough; both blue and white. I picked a handful, ran in with them, and put them on my mother's lap. The Rector was sitting by her still, but he got up then.

"Oh, Charley, they are very sweet," she said with a smile—"very sweet and lovely. Thank you, my precious boy, my darling."

She kissed me a hundred times. She might have kissed me a hundred more, but papa drew me away.

"Do not tire yourself any more to-day, Lucy; it is not good for you. Charley, boy, you can take your fairy tales and show them to Leah."

The day of the funeral will never fade from my memory; and yet I can only recall some of its incidents. What impressed me most was that papa did not stand at the grave in his surplice reading the service, as I had seen him do at other funerals. Another clergyman was in his place, and he stood by me in silence, holding my hand. And he told me, after we returned home, that mamma was not herself in the cold dark grave, but a happy angel in heaven looking down upon me.

And so the time went on. Papa was more grave than of yore, and taught me my lessons daily. Leah indulged and scolded me alternately, often sang to me, for she had a clear voice, and when she was in a good humour would let me read "Sintram" and the fairy tales to her.

The interest of mamma's money—which was now mine—brought in three hundred a year. She had enjoyed it all; I was to have (or, rather, my father for me) just as much of it as the two trustees chose to allow, for it was strictly tied up in their hands. When I was twenty-four years of age—not before—the duties of the trustees would cease, and the whole sum, six thousand pounds, would come into my uncontrolled possession. One of the trustees was my mother's uncle, Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar; the other I did not know. Of course the reader will understand that I do not explain these matters from my knowledge at that time; but from what I learnt when I was older.

Nearly a year had gone by, and it was warm spring weather again. I sat in my brown-holland dress in the dingle amidst the wild flowers. A lot of cowslips lay about me; I had been picking the flowers from the stalks to make into a ball. The sunlight flickered through the trees, still in their tender green; the sky was blue and cloudless. My straw hat, with broad black ribbons, had fallen off; my white socks and shoes were stretched out before me. Fashion is always in extremes. Then it was the custom to dress a child simply up to quite an advanced age.

Why it should have been so, I know not; but while I sat, there came over me a sudden remembrance of the day when I had come to the dingle to pick those violets for mamma, and a rush of tears came on. Leah took good care of me, but she was not my mother. My father was good, and grave, and kind, but he did not give me the love that she had given. A mother's love would never be mine again, and I knew it; and in that moment was bitterly feeling it.

One end of the string was held between my teeth, the other end in my left hand, and my eyes were wet with tears. I strung the cowslips as well as I could. But it was not easy, and I made little progress.

"S'all I hold it for oo?"

Lifting my eyes in surprise—for I had thought the movement in the dingle was only Leah, coming to see after me—there stood the sweetest fairy of a child before me. The sleeves of her cotton frock and white pinafore were tied up with black ribbons; her face was delicately fair, her eyes were blue as the sky, and her light curls fell low on her pretty neck. My child heart went out to her with a bound, then and there.

"What oo trying for, 'ittle boy?"

"I was crying for mamma. She's gone away from me to heaven."

"S'all I tiss oo?"

And she put her little arms round my neck, without waiting for permission, and gave me a dozen kisses.

"Now we make the ball, 'ittle boy. S'all oo dive it to me?"

"Yes, I will give it to you. What is your name?"

"Baby. What is oors?"

"Charles. Do you—"

"You little toad of a monkey!—giving me this hunt! How came you to run away?"

The words were spoken by a tall, handsome boy, quite old compared with me, who had come dashing through the dingle. He caught up the child and began kissing her fondly. So the words were not meant to hurt her.

"It was oo ran away, Tom."

"But I ordered you to stop where I left you—and to sit still till I came back again. If you run away by yourself in the wood, you'll meet a great bear some day and he'll eat you up. Mind that, Miss Blanche. The mamsie is in a fine way; thinks you're lost, you silly little thing."

"Dat 'towslip ball for me, Tom."

Master Tom condescended to turn his attention upon me and the ball. I guessed now who they were: a family named Heriot, who had recently come to live at the pretty white cottage on the other side the copse. Tom was looking at me with his fine dark eyes.

"You are the parson's son, I take it, youngster. I saw you in the parson's pew on Sunday with an old woman."

"She is not an old woman," I said, jealous for Leah.

"A young one, then. What's your name?"

"Charles Strange."

"He dot no mamma, he try for her," put in the child. "Oo come to my mamma, ittle boy; she love oo and tiss oo."

"When I have made your ball."

"Oh, bother the ball!" put in Tom. "We can't wait for that: the mamsie's in a rare way already. You can come home with us if you like, youngster, and finish your ball afterwards."

Leaving the cowslips, I caught up my hat and we started, Tom carrying the child. I was a timid, sensitive little fellow, but took courage to ask him a question.

"Is your name Tom Heriot?"

"Well, yes, it *is* Tom Heriot—if it does you any good to know it. And this is Miss Blanche Heriot. And I wish you were a bit bigger and older; I'd make you my playfellow."

We were through the copse in a minute or two and in sight of the white cottage, over the field beyond it. Mrs. Heriot stood at the garden gate, looking out. She was a pretty little plump woman, with a soft voice, and wore a widow's cap. A servant in a check apron was with her, and knew me. Mrs. Heriot scolded Blanche for running away from Tom while she caressed her, and turned to smile at me.

"It is little Master Strange," I heard the maid say to her. "He lost his mother a year ago."

"Oh, poor little fellow!" sighed Mrs. Heriot, as she held me before her and kissed me twice. "What a nice little lad it is!—what lovely eyes! My dear, you can come here whenever you like, and play with Tom and Blanche."

Some few years before, this lady had married Colonel Heriot, a widower with one little boy—Thomas. After that, Blanche was born: so that she and Tom were, you see, only half-brother-and-sister. When Blanche was two years old—she was three now—Colonel Heriot died, and Mrs. Heriot had come into the country to economize. She was not at all well off; had, indeed, little beyond what

was allowed her with the two children: all their father's fortune had lapsed to them, and she had no control over it. Tom had more than Blanche, and was to be brought up for a soldier.

As we stood in a group outside the gate, papa came by. Seeing me, he naturally stopped, took off his hat to Mrs. Heriot, and spoke. That is how the acquaintanceship began, without formal introduction on either side. Taking the pretty little girl in his arms, he began talking to her: for he was very fond of children. Mrs. Heriot said something to him in a low, feeling tone about his wife's death.

"Yes," he sighed in answer, as he put down the child: "I shall never recover her loss. I live only in the hope of rejoining her there."

He glanced up at the blue sky: the pure, calm, peaceful canopy of heaven.

CHAPTER II. CHANGES

"**I SHALL** never recover her loss. I live only in the hope of rejoining her there."

It has been said that the vows of lovers are ephemeral as characters written on the sand of the sea-shore. Surely may this also be said of the regrets mourners give to the departed! For time has a habit of soothing the deepest sorrow; and the remembrance which is piercing our hearts so poignantly to-day in a few short months will have lost its sting.

My father was quite sincere when speaking the above words: meant and believed them to the very letter. Yet before the spring and summer flowers had given place to those of autumn, he had taken unto himself another wife: Mrs. Heriot.

The first intimation of what was in contemplation came to me from Leah. I had offended her one day; done something wrong, or not done something right; and she fell upon me with a stern reproach, especially accusing me of ingratitude.

"After all my care of you, Master Charles—my anxiety and trouble to keep your clothes nice and make you good! What shall you do when I have gone away?"

"But you are not going away, Leah."

"I don't know that. We are to have changes here, it seems, and I'm not sure that they will suit me."

"What changes?" I asked.

She sat at the nursery window, which had the same aspect as the drawing-room below, darning my socks; I knelt on a chair, looking out. It was a rainy day, and the drops pattered thickly against the panes.

"Well, there's going to be—some company in the house," said Leah, taking her own time to answer me. "A *lot* of them. And I think perhaps there'll be no room for me."

"Oh, yes there will. Who is it, Leah?"

"I shouldn't wonder but it's those people over yonder," pointing her long darning-needle in the direction of the dingle.

"There's nothing there but mosses and trees, Leah. No people."

"There *is* a little farther off," nodded Leah. "There's Mrs. Heriot and her two children."

"Oh, do you say they are coming here!—do you mean it?" I cried in ecstasy. "Are they coming for a long visit, Leah?—to have breakfast here, and dine and sleep? Oh, how glad I am!"

"Ah!" groaned Leah; "perhaps you may be glad just at first; you are but a little shallow-sensed boy, Charley: but it may turn out for better, or it may turn out for worse."

To my intense astonishment, she dropped her work, burst into tears, and threw her hands up to her face. I felt very uncomfortable.

"What is it, Leah?"

"Well, it is that I'm a silly," she answered, looking up and drying her eyes. "I got thinking of the past, Master Charley, of your dear mamma, and all that. It *is* solitary for you here, and perhaps you'll be happier with some playfellows."

I went on staring at her.

"And look here, Master Charles, don't repeat what I've said; not to anybody, mind; or perhaps they won't come at all," concluded Leah, administering a slight shaking by way of enforcing her command.

There came a day—it was in that same week—when everything seemed to go wrong, as far as I was concerned. I had been at warfare with Leah in the morning, and was so inattentive (I suppose) at lessons in the afternoon that papa scolded me, and gave me an extra Latin exercise to do when

they were over, and shut me up in the study until it was done. Then Leah refused jam for tea, which I wanted; saying that jam was meant for good boys, not for naughty ones. Altogether I was in anything but an enviable mood when I went out later into the garden. The most cruel item in the whole was that I could not see *I* had been to blame, but thought everyone else was. The sun had set behind the trees of the dingle in a red ball of fire as I climbed into my favourite seat—the fork of the pear-tree. Papa had gone to attend a vestry meeting; the little bell of the church was tinkling out, giving notice of the meeting to the parish.

Presently the bell ceased; solitary silence ensued both to eye and ear. The brightness of the atmosphere was giving place to the shades of approaching evening; the trees were putting on their melancholy. I have always thought—I always shall think—that nothing can be more depressing than the indescribable melancholy which trees in a solitary spot seem to put on after sunset. All people do not feel this; but to those who, like myself, see it, it brings a sensation of loneliness, nay, of *awe*, that is strangely painful.

"Ho-ho! So you are up there again, young Charley!"

The garden-gate had swung back to admit Tom Heriot. In hastening down from the tree—for he had a way of tormenting me when in it—I somehow lost my balance and fell on to the grass. Tom shrieked out with laughter, and made off again.

The fall was nothing—though my ankle ached; but at these untoward moments a little smart causes a great pain. It seemed to me that I was smarting all over, inside and out, mentally and bodily; and I sat down on the bench near the bed of shrubs, and burst into tears.

Sweet shrubs were they. Lavender and rosemary, old-man and sweet-briar, marjoram and lemon-thyme, musk and verbenas; and others, no doubt. Mamma had had them all planted there. She would sit with me where I was now sitting alone, under the syringa trees, and revel in the perfume. In spring-time those sweet syringa blossoms would surround us; she loved their scent better than any other. Bitterly I cried, thinking of all this, and of her.

Again the gate opened, more gently this time, and Mrs. Heriot came in looking round. "Thomas," she called out—and then she saw me. "Charley, dear, has Tom been here? He ran away from me.—Why, my dear little boy, what is the matter?" For she had seen the tears falling.

They fell faster than ever at the question. She came up, sat down on the bench, and drew my face lovingly to her. I thought then—I think still—that Mrs. Heriot was one of the kindest, gentlest women that ever breathed. I don't believe she ever in her whole life said a sharp word to anyone.

Not liking to tell of my naughtiness—which I still attributed to others—or of the ignominious fall from the pear-tree, I sobbed forth something about mamma.

"If she had not gone away and left me alone," I said, "I should never have been unhappy, or—or cried. People were not cross with me when she was here."

"My darling, I know how lonely it is for you. Would you like me to come here and be your mamma?" she caressingly whispered.

"You could not be that," I dissented. "Mamma's up there."

Mrs. Heriot glanced up at the evening sky. "Yes, Charley, she is up there, with God; and she looks down, I feel sure, at you, and at what is being done for you. If I came home here I should try to take care of you as she would have done. And oh, my child, I should love you dearly."

"In her place?" I asked, feeling puzzled.

"In her place, Charley. *For her.*"

Tom burst in at the gate again. He began telling his stepmother of my fall as he danced a war-dance on the grass, and asked me how many of my legs and wings were broken.

They came to the Rectory: Mrs. Heriot—she was Mrs. Strange then—and Tom and Baby. After all, Leah did not leave. She grew reconciled to the new state of things in no time, and became as fond of the children as she was of me. As fond, at least, of Tom. I don't know that she ever cared heartily for Blanche: the little lady had a haughty face, and sometimes a haughty way with her.

We were all as happy as the day was long. Mrs. Strange indulged us all. Tom was a dreadful pickle—it was what the servants called him; but they all adored him. He was a handsome, generous, reckless boy, two years older than myself in years, twice two in height and advancement. He teased Leah's life out of her; but the more he teased, the better she liked him. He teased Blanche, he teased me; though he would have gone through fire and water for either of us, ay, and laid down his life any moment to save ours. He was everlastingly in mischief indoors or out. He called papa "sir" to his face, "the parson" or "his reverence" behind his back. There was no taming Tom Heriot.

For a short time papa took Tom's lessons with mine. But he found it would not answer. Tom's guardians wrote to beg of the Rector to continue to undertake him for a year or two, offering a handsome recompense in return. But my father wrote word back that the lad needed the discipline of school and must have it. So to school Tom was sent. He came home in the holidays, reckless and random, generous and loving as ever, and we had fine times together, the three of us growing up like brothers and sister. Of course, I was not related to them at all: and they were only half related to each other.

Rather singularly, Thomas Heriot's fortune was just as much as mine: six thousand pounds: and left in very much the same way. The interest, three hundred a year, was to maintain and educate him for the army; and he would come into the whole when he was twenty-one. Blanche had less: four thousand pounds only, and it was secured in the same way as Tom's was until she should be twenty-one, or until she married.

And thus about a couple of years went on.

No household was ever less given to superstition than ours at White Littleham Rectory. It never as much as entered the mind of any of its inmates, from its master downwards. And perhaps it was this complete indifference to and disbelief in the supernatural that caused the matter to be openly spoken of by the Rector. I have since thought so.

It was Christmas-tide, and Christmas weather. Frost and snow covered the ground. Icicles on the branches glittered in the sunshine like diamonds.

"It is the jolliest day!" exclaimed Tom, dashing into the breakfast-room from an early morning run half over the parish. "People are slipping about like mad, and the ice is inches thick on the ponds. Old Joe Styles went right down on his back."

"I hope he was not hurt, Tom," remarked papa, coming down from his chamber into the room in time to hear the last sentence. "Good-morning, my boys."

"Oh, it was only a Christmas gambol, sir," said Tom carelessly.

We sat down to breakfast. Leah came in to see to me and Tom. The Rector might be—and was—efficient in his parish and pulpit, but a more hopelessly incapable man in a domestic point of view the world never saw. Tom and I should have come badly off had we relied upon him to help us, and we might have gobbled up every earthly thing on the table without his saying yea or nay. Leah, knowing this, stood to pour out the coffee. Mrs. Strange had gone away to London on Wednesday (the day after Christmas Day) to see an old aunt who was ill, and had taken Blanche with her. This was Friday, and they were expected home again on the morrow.

Presently Tom, who was observant in his way, remarked that papa was taking nothing. His coffee stood before him untouched; some bacon lay neglected on his plate.

"Shall I cut you some thin bread and butter, sir?" asked Leah.

"Presently," said he, and went on doing nothing as before.

"What are you thinking of, papa?"

"Well, Charley, I—I was thinking of my dream," he answered. "I suppose it *was* a dream," he went on, as if to himself. "But it was a curious one."

"Oh, please tell it us!" I cried. "I dreamt on Christmas night that I had a splendid plum-cake, and was cutting it up into slices."

"Well—it was towards morning," he said, still speaking in a dreamy sort of way, his eyes looking straight out before him as if he were recalling it, yet evidently seeing nothing. "I awoke suddenly with the sound of a voice in my ear. It was your mamma's voice, Charley; your own mother's; and she seemed to be standing at my bedside. 'I am coming for you,' she said to me—or seemed to say. I was wide awake in a moment, and knew her voice perfectly. Curious, was it not, Leah?"

Leah, cutting bread and butter for Tom, had halted, loaf in one hand, knife in the other.

"Yes, sir," she answered, gazing at the Rector. "Did you *see* anything, sir?"

"No; not exactly," he returned. "I was conscious that whoever spoke to me, stood close to my bedside; and I was also conscious that the figure retreated across the room towards the window. I cannot say that I absolutely saw the movement; it was more like some unseen presence in the room. It was very odd. Somehow I can't get it out of my head— Why, here's Mr. Penthorn!" he broke off to say.

Mr. Penthorn had opened the gate, and was walking briskly up the path. He was our doctor; a gray-haired man, active and lively, and very friendly with us all. He had looked in, in passing back to the village, to tell the Rector that a parishioner, to whom he had been called up in the night, was in danger.

"I'll go and see her," said papa. "You'd be none the worse for a cup of coffee, Penthorn. It is sharp weather."

"Well, perhaps I shouldn't," said he, sitting down by me, while Tom went off to the kitchen for a cup and saucer. "Sharp enough—but seasonable. Is anything amiss with you, Leah? Indigestion again?"

This caused us to look at Leah. She was whiter than the table-cloth.

"No, sir; I'm all right," answered Leah, as she took the cup from Tom's hand and began to fill it with coffee and hot milk. "Something that the master has been telling us scared me a bit at the moment, that's all."

"And what was that?" asked the Doctor lightly.

So the story had to be gone over again, papa repeating it rather more elaborately. Mr. Penthorn was sceptical, and said it was a dream.

"I have just called it a dream," assented my father. "But, in one sense, it was certainly not a dream. I had not been dreaming at all, to my knowledge; have not the least recollection of doing so. I woke up fully in a moment, with the voice ringing in my ears."

"The voice must have been pure fancy," declared Mr. Penthorn.

"That it certainly was not," said the Rector. "I never heard a voice more plainly in my life; every tone, every word was distinct and clear. No, Penthorn; that someone spoke to me is certain; the puzzle is—who was it?"

"Someone must have got into your room, then," said the Doctor, throwing his eyes suspiciously across the table at Tom.

Leah turned sharply round to face Tom. "Master Tom, if you played this trick, say so," she cried, her voice trembling.

"I! that's good!" retorted Tom, as earnestly as he could speak. "I never got out of bed from the time I got into it. Wasn't likely to. I never woke up at all."

"It was not Tom," interposed papa. "How could Tom assume my late wife's voice? It *was* her voice, Penthorn. I had never heard it since she left us; and it has brought back all its familiar tones to my memory."

The Doctor helped himself to some bread and butter, and gave his head a shake.

"Besides," resumed the Rector, "no one else ever addressed me as she did—'Eustace.' I have not been called Eustace since my mother died, many years ago, except by her. My present wife has never called me by it."

That was true. Mrs. Strange had a pet name for him, and it was "Hubby."

"I am coming for you, Eustace," said the voice. It was her voice; her way of speaking. I can't account for it at all, Penthorn. I can't get it out of my head, though it sounds altogether so ridiculous."

"Well, I give it up," said Mr. Penthorn, finishing his coffee. "If you *were* awake, Strange, someone must have been essaying a little sleight-of-hand upon you. Good-morning, all of you; I must be off to my patients. Tom Heriot, don't you get trying the ponds yet, or maybe I shall have you on my hands as well as other people."

We gave it up also: and nothing more was said or thought of it, as far as I know. We were not, I repeat, a superstitious family. Papa went about his duties as usual, and Leah went about hers. The next day, Saturday, Mrs. Strange and Blanche returned home; and the cold grew sharper and the frozen ponds were lovely.

On Monday afternoon, the last day of the year, the Rector mounted old Dobbin, to ride to the next parish. He had to take a funeral for the incumbent, who was in bed with gout.

"Have his shoes been roughed?" asked Tom, standing at the gate with me to watch the start.

"Yes; and well roughed too, Master Tom," spoke up James, who had lived with us longer than I could remember, as gardener, groom, and general man-of-all-work. "'Tisn't weather, sir, to send him out without being rough-shod."

"You two boys had better get to your Latin for an hour, and prepare it for me for to-morrow; and afterwards you may go to the ponds," said my father, as he rode away. "Good-bye, lads. Take care of yourself, Charley."

"Bother Latin!" said Tom. "I'm going off now. Will you come, youngster?"

"Not till I've done my Latin."

"You senseless young donkey! Stay, though; I must tell the mamsie something."

He made for the dining-room, where Mrs. Strange sat with Blanche. "Look here, mamsie," said he; "let us have a bit of a party to-night."

"A party, Tom!" she returned.

"Just the young Penthorns and the Clints."

"Oh, do, mamma!" I cried, for I was uncommonly fond of parties. And "Do, mamma!" struck in little Blanche.

My new mother rarely denied us anything; but she hesitated now.

"I think not to-night, dears. You know we are going to have the school-treat tomorrow evening, and the servants are busy with the cakes and things. They shall come on Wednesday instead, Tom."

Tom laughed. "They *must* come to-night, mamsie. They *are* coming. I have asked them."

"What—the young Penthorns?"

"*And* the young Clints," said Tom, clasping his stepmother, and kissing her. "They'll be here on the stroke of five. Mind you treat us to plenty of tarts and cakes, there's a good mamsie!"

Tom went off with his skates. I got to my books. After that, some friends came to call, and the afternoon seemed to pass in no time.

"It is hardly worth while your going to the ponds now, Master Charles," said Leah, meeting me in the passage, when I was at last at liberty.

In looking back I think that I must have had a very obedient nature, for I was ever willing to listen to orders or suggestions, however unpalatable they might be. Passing through the back-door, the nearest way to the square pond, to which Tom had gone, I looked out. Twilight was already setting in. The evening star twinkled in a clear, frosty sky. The moon shone like a silver shield.

"Before you could get to the square pond, Master Charley, it would be dark," said Leah, as she stood beside me.

"So it would," I assented. "I think I'll not go, Leah."

"And I'm sure you don't need to tire yourself for to-night," went on Leah. "There'll be romping enough and to spare if those boys and girls come."

I went back to the parlour. Leah walked to the side gate, wondering (as she said afterwards) what had come to the milkman, for he was generally much earlier. As she stood looking down the lane, she saw Tom stealing up.

"He has been in some mischief," decided Leah. "It's not like *him* to creep up in that timorous fashion. Good patience! Why, the lad must have had a fright; his face is white as death."

"Leah!" said the boy, shrinking as he glanced over his shoulder. "Leah!"

"Well, what on earth is it?" asked Leah, feeling a little dread herself. "What have you been up to at that pond? You've not been in it yourself, I suppose!"

"Papa—the parson—is lying in the road by the triangle, all pale and still. He does not move."

Whenever Master Tom Heriot saw a chance of scaring the kitchen with a fable, he plunged into one. Leah peered at him doubtfully in the fading light.

"I think he is dead. I'm sure he is," continued Tom, bursting into tears.

This convinced Leah. She uttered a faint cry.

"We took that way back from the square pond; I, and Joe and Bertie Penthorn. They were going home to get ready to come here. Then we saw something lying near the triangle, close to that heap of flint-stones. It was *him*, Leah. Oh! what is to be done? I can't tell mamma, or poor Charley."

James ran up, all scared, as Tom finished speaking. He had found Dobbin at the stable-door, without sign or token of his master.

Even yet I cannot bear to think of that dreadful night. We *had* to be told, you see; and Leah lost no time over it. While Tom came home with the news, Joe Penthorn had run for his father, and Bertie called to some labourers who were passing on the other side of the triangle.

He was brought home on a litter, the men carrying it, Mr. Penthorn walking by its side. He was not dead, but quite unconscious. They put a mattress on the study-table, and laid him on it.

He had been riding home from the funeral. Whether Dobbin, usually so sure-footed and steady, had plunged his foot into a rut, just glazed over by the ice, and so had stumbled; or whether something had startled him and caused him to swerve, we never knew. The Rector had been thrown violently, his head striking the stones.

Mr. Penthorn did not leave the study. Two other surgeons, summoned in haste from the neighbouring town, joined him. They could do nothing for papa—*nothing*. He never recovered consciousness, and died during the night—about a quarter before three o'clock.

"I knew he would go just at this time, sir," whispered Leah to Mr. Penthorn as he was leaving the house and she opened the front-door for him. "I felt sure of it when the doctors said he would not see morning light. It was just at the same hour that he had his call, sir, three nights ago. As sure as that he is now lying there dead, as sure as that those stars are shining in the heavens above us, *that was his warning*."

"Nonsense, Leah!" reproved Mr. Penthorn sharply.

Chances and changes. The world is full of them. A short time and White Littleham Rectory knew us no more. The Reverend Eustace Strange was sleeping his last sleep in the churchyard by his wife's side, and the Reverend John Ravensworth was the new Rector.

Tom Heriot went back to school. I was placed at one chosen for me by my great-uncle, Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar. Leah Williams left us to take service in another family, who were about to settle somewhere on the Continent. She could not speak for emotion when she said good-bye to me.

"It must be for years, Master Charles, and it may be for ever," she said, taking, I fancy, the words from one of the many favourite ditties, martial or love-lorn, she treated us to in the nursery. "No, we may never meet again in this life, Master Charles. All the same, I hope we shall."

And meet we did, though not for years and years. And it would no doubt have called forth indignation from Leah had I been able to foretell how, when that meeting came in after-life, she would purposely withhold her identity from me and pass herself off as a stranger.

Mrs. Strange went to London, Blanche with her, to take up for the present her abode with her old aunt, who had invited her to do so. She was little, if any, better off in this second widowhood than she had been as the widow of Colonel Heriot. What papa had to leave he left to her; but it was not much. I had my own mother's money. And so we were all separated again; all divided: one here, another there, a third elsewhere. It is the way of the world. Change and chance! chance and change!

CHAPTER III.

MR. SERJEANT STILLINGFAR

Gloucester Place, Portman Square. In one of its handsome houses—as they are considered to be by persons of moderate desires—dwelt its owner, Major Carlen. Major Carlen was a man of the world; a man of fashion. When the house had fallen to him some years before by the will of a relative, with a substantial sum of money to keep it up, he professed to despise the house to his brother-officers and other acquaintances of the great world. He would have preferred a house in Belgrave Square, or in Grosvenor Place, or in Park Lane. Major Carlen was accustomed to speak largely; it was his way.

Since then, he had retired from the army, and was master of himself, his time and his amusements. Major Carlen was fond of clubs, fond of card-playing, fond of dinners; fond, indeed, of whatever constitutes fast life. His house in Gloucester Place was handsomely furnished, replete with comfort, and possessed every reasonable requisite for social happiness—even to a wife. And Major Carlen's wife was Jessy, once Mrs. Strange, once Mrs. Heriot.

It is quite a problem why some women cannot marry at all, try to do so as they may, whilst others become wives three and four times over, and without much seeking of their own. Mrs. Heriot (to give her her first name) was one of these. In very little more than a year after her first husband died, she married her second; in not any more than a year after her second husband's death, she married her third. Major Carlen must have been captivated by her pretty face and purring manner; whilst she fell prone at the feet of the man of fashion, and perhaps a very little at the prospect of being mistress of the house in Gloucester Place. Anyway, the why and the wherefore lay between themselves. Mrs. Strange became Mrs. Carlen.

Reading over thus far, it has struck me that you may reasonably think the story is to consist chiefly of marrying and dying; for there has been an undue proportion of both events. Not so: as you will find as you go on. Our ancestors do marry and die, you know: and these first three chapters are only a prologue to the story which has to come.

Christmas has come round again. Not the Christmas following that which ended so disastrously for us at White Littleham Rectory, but one five years later. For the stream of time flows on its course, and boys and girls grow insensibly towards men and women.

It had been a green Christmas this year. We were now some days past it. The air was mild, the skies were blue and genial. Newspapers told of violets and other flowers growing in nooks, sheltered and unsheltered. Mrs. Carlen, seated by a well-spread table, half dinner, half tea, in the dining-room at Gloucester Place, declared that the fire made the room too warm. I was reading. Blanche, a very fair and pretty girl, now ten years old, sat on a stool on the hearthrug, her light curls tied back with blue ribbons, her hands lying idly on the lap of her short silk frock. We were awaiting an arrival.

"Listen, Charles!" cried mamma—as I called her still. "I do think a cab is stopping."

I put down my book, and Blanche threw back her head and her blue ribbons in expectation. But the cab went on.

"It is just like Tom!" smiled Mrs. Carlen. "Nothing ever put him out as it does other people. He gives us one hour and means another. He *said* seven o'clock, so we may expect him at ten. I do wish he could have obtained leave for Christmas Day!"

Major Carlen did not like children, boys especially: yet Tom Heriot and I had been allowed to spend our holidays at his house, summer and winter. Mrs. Carlen stood partly in the light of a mother to us both; and I expect our guardians paid substantially for the privilege. Tom was now nearly eighteen, and had had a commission given him in a crack regiment; partly, it was said, through the interest of Major Carlen. I was between fifteen and sixteen.

"I'm sure you children must be famishing," cried Mrs. Carlen. "It wants five minutes to eight. If Tom is not here as the clock strikes, we will begin tea."

The silvery bell had told its eight strokes and was dying away, when a cab dashing past the door suddenly pulled up. No mistake this time. We heard Tom's voice abusing the driver—or, as he called it, "pitching into him"—for not looking at the numbers.

What a fine, handsome young fellow he had grown! And how joyously he met us all; folding mother, brother and sister in one eager embrace. Tom Heriot was careless and thoughtless as it was possible for anyone to be, but he had a warm and affectionate heart. When trouble, and something worse, fell upon him later, and he became a town's talk, people called him bad-hearted amongst other reproaches; but they were mistaken.

"Why, Charley, how you have shot up!" he cried gaily. "You'll soon overtake me."

I shook my head. "While I am growing, Tom, you will be growing also."

"What was it you said in your last letter?" he went on, as we began tea. "That you were going to leave school?"

"Well, I fancy so, Tom. Uncle Stillingfar gave notice at Michaelmas."

"Thinks you know enough, eh, lad?"

I could not say much about that. That I was unusually well educated for my years there could be no doubt about, especially in the classics and French. My father had laid a good foundation to begin with, and the school chosen for me was a first-rate one. The French resident master had taken a liking to me, and had me much with him. Once during the midsummer holidays he had taken me to stay with his people in France: to Abbeville, with its interesting old church and market-place, its quaint costumes and uncomfortable inns. Altogether, I spoke and wrote French almost as well as he did.

"What are they going to make of you, Charley? Is it as old Stillingfar pleases?"

"I think so. I dare say they'll put me to the law."

"Unfortunate martyr! I'd rather command a pirate-boat on the high seas than stew my brains over dry law-books and musty parchments!"

"Tastes differ," struck in Miss Blanche. "And you are not going to sea at all, Tom."

"Tastes do differ," smiled Mrs. Carlen. "I should think it much nicer to harangue judges and law-courts in a silk gown and wig, Tom, than to put on a red coat and go out to be shot at."

"Hark at the mamsie!" cried Tom, laughing. "Charley, give me some more tongue. Where's the Major to-night?"

The Major was dining out. Tom and I were always best pleased when he did dine out. A pompous, boasting sort of man, I did not like him at all. As Tom put it, we would at any time rather have his room than his company.

The days I am writing of are not these days. Boys left school earlier then than they do now. I suppose education was not so comprehensive as it is now made: but it served us. It was quite a usual thing to place a lad out in the world at fourteen or fifteen, whether to a profession or a trade. Therefore little surprise was caused at home by notice having been given of my removal from school.

At breakfast, next morning, Tom began laying out plans for the day. "I'll take you to this thing, Charley, and I'll take you to that." Major Carlen sat in his usual place at the foot of the table, facing his wife. An imposing-looking man, tall, thin and angular, who must formerly have been handsome. He had a large nose with a curious twist in it; white teeth, which he showed very much; light gray eyes that stared at you, and hair and whiskers of so brilliant a black that a suspicious person might have said they were dyed.

"I thought of taking you boys out myself this afternoon," spoke the Major. "To see that horsemanship which is exhibiting. I hear it's very good. Would you like to go?"

"Oh, and me too!" struck in Blanche. "Take me, papa."

"No," answered the Major, after reflection. "I don't consider it a fit place for little girls. Would you boys like to go?" he asked.

We said we should like it; said it in a sort of surprise, for it was almost the first time he had ever offered to take us anywhere.

"Charles cannot go," hastily interrupted Mrs. Carlen, who had at length opened a letter which had been lying beside her plate. "This is from Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar, Charley. He asks me to send you to his chambers this afternoon. You are to be there at three o'clock."

"Just like old Stillingfar!" cried Tom resentfully. Considering that he did not know much of Serjeant Stillingfar and had very little experience of his ways, the reproach was gratuitous.

Major Carlen laughed at it. "We must put off the horsemanship to another day," said he. "It will come to the same thing. I will take you out somewhere instead, Blanchie."

Taking an omnibus in Oxford Street, when lunch was over, I went down to Holborn, and thence to Lincoln's Inn. The reader may hardly believe that I had never been to my uncle's chambers before, though I had sometimes been to his house. He seemed to have kept me at a distance. His rooms were on the first floor. On the outer door I read "Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar."

"Come in," cried out a voice, in answer to my knock. And I entered a narrow little room.

A pert-looking youth with a quantity of long, light curly hair and an eye-glass, and not much older than myself, sat on a stool at a desk, beside an unoccupied chair. He eyed me from head to foot. I wore an Eton jacket and turn-down collar; he wore a "tail" coat, a stand-up collar, and a stock.

"What do *you* want?" he demanded.

"I want Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar."

"Not in; not to be seen. You can come another day."

"But I am here by appointment."

The young gentleman caught up his eyeglass, fixed it, and turned it on me. "I don't think you are expected," said he coolly.

Now, though he had been gifted with a stock of native impudence, and a very good stock it was at his time of life, I had been gifted with native modesty. I waited in silence, not knowing what to do. Two or three chairs stood about. He no doubt would have tried them all in succession, had it suited him to do so. I did not like to take one of them.

"Will my uncle be long, do you know?" I asked.

"Who *is* your uncle?"

"Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar."

He put up his glass again, which had dropped, and stared at me harder than before. At this juncture an inner door was opened, and a middle-aged man in a black coat and white neckcloth came through it.

"Are you Mr. Strange?" he inquired, quietly and courteously.

"Yes. My uncle, Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar, wrote to tell me to be here at three o'clock."

"I know. Will you step in here? The Serjeant is in Court, but will not be long. As to you, young Mr. Lake, if you persist in exercising your impudent tongue upon all comers, I shall request the Serjeant to put a stop to your sitting here at all. How many times have you been told not to take upon yourself to answer callers, but to refer them to me when Michael is out?"

"About a hundred and fifty, I suppose, old Jones. Haven't counted them, though," retorted Mr. Lake.

"Impertinent young rascal!" ejaculated Mr. Jones, as he took me into the next room, and turned to a little desk that stood in a corner. He was the Serjeant's confidential clerk, and had been with him for years. Arthur Lake, beginning to read for the Bar, was allowed by the Serjeant and his clerk to sit in their chambers of a day, to pick up a little experience.

"Sit down by the fire, Mr. Strange," said the clerk. "It is a warm day, though, for the season. I expected the Serjeant in before this. He will not be long now."

Before I had well taken in the bearings of the room, which was the Serjeant's own, and larger and better than the other, he came in, wearing his silk gown and gray wig. He was a little man, growing

elderly now, with a round, smooth, fair face, out of which twinkled kindly blue eyes. Mr. Jones got up from his desk at once to divest him of wig and gown, producing at the same time a miniature flaxen wig, which the Serjeant put upon his head.

"So you have come, Charles!" he said, shaking hands with me as he sat down in a large elbow-chair. Mr. Jones went out with his arm full of papers and shut the door upon us.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"You will be sixteen next May, I believe," he added. He had the mildest voice and manner imaginable; not at all what might be expected in a serjeant-at-law, who was supposed to take the Court by storm on occasion. "And I understand from your late master that in all your studies you are remarkably well advanced."

"Pretty well, I think, sir," I answered modestly.

"Ay. I am glad to hear you speak of it in a diffident, proper sort of way. Always be modest, lad; true merit ever is so. It tells, too, in the long-run. Well, Charles, I think it time that you were placed out in life."

"Yes, sir."

"Is there any calling that you especially fancy? Any one profession you would prefer to embrace above another?"

"No, sir; I don't know that there is. I have always had an idea that it would be the law. I think I should like that."

"Just so," he answered, the faint pink on his smooth cheeks growing deeper with gratification. "It is what I have always intended you to enter—provided you had no insuperable objection to it. But I shall not make a barrister of you, Charles."

"No!" I exclaimed. "What then?"

"An attorney-at-law."

I was too much taken by surprise to answer at once. "Is that—a gentleman's calling, Uncle Charles?" I at length took courage to ask.

"Ay, that it is, lad," he impressively rejoined. "It's true you've no chance of the Woolsack or of a judgeship, or even of becoming a pleader, as I am. If you had a ready-made fortune, Charles, you might eat your dinners, get called, and risk it. But you have not; and I will not be the means of condemning the best years of your life to anxious poverty."

I only looked at him, without speaking. I fancy he must have seen disappointment in my face.

"Look here, Charles," he resumed, bending forward impressively: "I will tell you a little of my past experience. My people thought they were doing a great thing for me when they put me to the Bar. I thought the same. I was called in due course, and donned my stuff gown and wig in glory—the glory cast by the glamour of hope. How long my mind maintained that glamour; how long it was before it began to give place to doubt; how many years it took to merge doubt into despair, I cannot tell you. I think something like fifteen or twenty."

"Fifteen or twenty years, Uncle Stillingfar!"

"Not less. I was steady, persevering, sufficiently clever. Yet practice did not come to me. It is all a lottery. I had no fortune, lad; no one to help me. I was not clever at writing for the newspapers and magazines, as many of my fellows were. And for more years than I care to recall I had a hard struggle for existence. I was engaged to be married. She was a sweet, patient girl, and we waited until we were both bordering upon middle age. Ay, Charles, I was forty years old before practice began to flow in upon me. The long lane had taken a turning at last. It flew in then with a vengeance—more work than I could possibly undertake."

"And did you marry the young lady, Uncle Charles?" I asked in the pause he came to. I had never heard of his having a wife.

"No, child; she was dead. I think she died of waiting."

I drew a long breath, deeply interested.

"There are scores of young fellows starving upon hope now, as I starved then, Charles. The market is terribly overstocked. For ten barristers striving to rush into note in my days, you may count twenty or thirty in these. I will not have you swell the lists. My brother's grandson shall never, with my consent, waste his best years in fighting with poverty, waiting for luck that may never come to him."

"I suppose it is a lottery, as you say, sir."

"A lottery where blanks far outweigh the prizes," he assented. "A lottery into which you shall not enter. No, Charles; you shall be spared that. As a lawyer, I can make your progress tolerably sure. You may be a rich man in time if you will, and an honourable one. I have sounded my old friend, Henry Brightman, and I think he is willing to take you."

"I am afraid I should not make a good pleader, sir," I acknowledged, falling in with his views. "I can't speak a bit. We had a debating-club at school, and in the middle of a speech I always lost myself."

He nodded, and rose. "You shall not try it, my boy. And that's all for to-day, Charles. All I wanted was to sound your views before making arrangements with Brightman."

"Has he a good practice, sir?"

"He has a very large and honourable practice, Charles. He is a good man and a *gentleman*," concluded the Serjeant emphatically. "All being well, you may become his partner sometime."

"Am I not to go to Oxford, sir?" I asked wistfully.

"If you particularly wish to do so and circumstances permit it, you may perhaps keep a few terms when you are out of your articles," he replied, with hesitation. "We shall see, Charles, when that time comes."

"What a shame!" exclaimed Mrs. Carlen, when I reached home. "Make you a lawyer! That he never shall, Charles. I shall not allow it. I will go down and remonstrate with him."

Major Carlen said it was a shame; said it contemptuously. Tom said it was a double-shame, and threw a host of hard words upon Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar. Blanche began to cry. She had been reading that day about a press-gang, and quite believed my fate would be worse than that of being pressed.

After breakfast, next morning, we hastened to Lincoln's Inn: I and Mrs. Carlen, for she kept her word. I should be a barrister or nothing, she protested. All very fine to say so! She had no power over me whatever. That lay with Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar and the other trustee, and he never interfered. If they chose to article me to a chimneysweep instead of a lawyer, no one could say them nay.

Mr. Jones and young Lake sat side by side at the desk in the first room when we arrived. Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar was in his own room. He received us very kindly, shaking hands with Mrs. Carlen, whom he had seen occasionally. Mrs. Carlen, sitting opposite to him, entered upon her protest, and was meekly listened to by the Serjeant.

"Better be a successful attorney, madam, than a briefless barrister," he observed, when she finished.

"All barristers are not briefless," said Mrs. Carlen.

"A great many of them are," he answered. "Some of them never make their mark at all; they live and die struggling men." And, leaning forward in his chair—as he had leaned towards me yesterday—he repeated a good deal that he had then said of his own history; his long-continued poverty, and his despairing struggles. Mrs. Carlen's heart melted.

"Yes, I know. It is very sad, dear Mr. Serjeant, and I am sure your experience is only that of many others," she sighed. "But, if I understand the matter rightly, the chief trouble of these young barristers is their poverty. Had they means to live, they could wait patiently and comfortably until success came to them."

"Of course," he assented. "It is the want of private means that makes the uphill path so hard."

"Charles has his three hundred a year."

The faint pink in his cheeks, just the hue of a sea-shell, turned to crimson. I was sitting beyond the table, and saw it. He glanced across at me.

"It will take more money to make Charles a lawyer and to ensure him a footing afterwards in a good house than it would to get him called to the Bar," he said with a smile.

"Yes—perhaps so. But that is not quite the argument, Mr. Serjeant," said my stepmother. "Any young man who has three hundred a year may manage to live upon it."

"It is to be hoped so. I know I should have thought three hundred a year a perfect gold-mine."

"Then you see Charles need not starve while waiting for briefs to come in to him. Do you *not* see that, Mr. Serjeant?"

"I see it very clearly," he mildly said. "Had Charles his three hundred a year to fall back upon, he might have gone to the Bar had he liked, and risked the future."

"But he has it," Mrs. Carlen rejoined, surprise in her tone.

"No, madam, he has it not. Nor two hundred a year, nor one hundred."

They silently looked at one another for a full minute. Mrs. Carlen evidently could not understand his meaning. I am sure I did not.

"Charles's money, I am sorry to say, is lost," he continued.

"Lost! Since when?"

"Since the bank-panic that we had nearly two years ago."

Mrs. Carlen collapsed. "Oh, dear!" she breathed. "Did you—pray forgive the question, Mr. Serjeant—did you lose it? Or—or—the other trustee?"

He shook his head. "No, no. We neither lost it, nor are we responsible for the loss. Charles's grandfather, my brother, invested the money, six thousand pounds, in bank debentures to bring in five per cent. He settled the money upon his daughter, Lucy, and upon her children after her, making myself and our old friend, George Wickham, trustees. In the panic of two years ago this bank *went*; its shares and its debentures became all but worthless."

"Is the money all gone? quite gone?" gasped Mrs. Carlen. "Will it never be recovered?"

"The debentures are Charles's still, but they are for the present almost worthless," he replied. "The bank went on again, and if it can recover itself and regain prosperity, Charles in the end may not greatly suffer. He may regain his money, or part of it. But it will not be yet awhile. The unused portion of the income had been sunk, year by year, in further debentures, in accordance with the directions of the will. All went."

"But—someone must have paid for Charles all this time—two whole years!" she reiterated, in vexed surprise.

"Yes! it has been managed," he gently said.

"I think you must have paid for him yourself," spoke Mrs. Carlen with impulse. "I think it is you who are intending to pay the premium to Mr. Brightman, and to provide for his future expenses? You are a good man, Mr. Serjeant Stillingfar!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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