

HENRY WOOD

ELSTER'S

FOLLY

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Mrs. Henry Wood

Elster's Folly: A Novel

CHAPTER I.

BY THE EARLY TRAIN

The ascending sun threw its slanting rays abroad on a glorious August morning, and the little world below began to awaken into life—the life of another day of sanguine pleasure or of fretting care.

Not on many fairer scenes did those sunbeams shed their radiance than on one existing in the heart of England; but almost any landscape will look beautiful in the early light of a summer's morning. The county, one of the midlands, was justly celebrated for its scenery; its rich woods and smiling plains, its river and gentler streams. The harvest was nearly gathered in—it had been a late season—but a few fields of golden grain, in process of reaping, gave their warm tints to the landscape. In no part of the country had the beauties of nature been bestowed more lavishly than on this, the village of Calne, situated about seven miles from the county town.

It was an aristocratic village, on the whole. The fine seat of the Earl of Hartledon, rising near it, had caused a few families of note to settle there, and the nest of white villas gave the place a prosperous and picturesque appearance. But it contained a full proportion of the poor or labouring class; and these people were falling very much into the habit of writing the village "Cawn," in accordance with its pronunciation. Phonetic spelling was more in their line than Johnson's Dictionary. Of what may be called the middle class the village held few, if any: there were the gentry, the small shopkeepers, and the poor.

Calne had recently been exalted into importance. A year or two before this bright August morning some good genius had brought a railway to it—a railway and a station, with all its accompanying work and bustle. Many trains passed it in the course of the day; for it was in the direct line of route from the county town, Garchester, to London, and the traffic was increasing. People wondered what travellers had done, and what sort of a round they traversed, before this direct line was made.

The village itself lay somewhat in a hollow, the ground rising to a gentle eminence on either side. On the one eminence, to the west, was situated the station; on the other, eastward, rose the large stone mansion, Hartledon House. The railway took a slight *détour* outside Calne, and was a conspicuous feature to any who chose to look at it; for the line had been raised above the village hollow to correspond with the height at either end.

Six o'clock was close at hand, and the station began to show signs of life. The station-master came out of his cottage, and opened one or two doors on the platform. He had held the office scarcely a year yet; and had come a stranger to Calne. Sitting down in his little bureau of a place, on the door of which was inscribed "Station-master—Private," he began sorting papers on the desk before him. A few minutes, and the clock struck six; upon which he went out to the platform. It was an open station, as these small stations generally are, the small waiting-rooms and offices on either side scarcely obstructing the view of the country, and the station-master looked far out in the distance, towards the east, beyond the low-lying village houses, shading his eyes with his hand from the dazzling sun.

"Her's late this morning."

The interruption came from the surly porter, who stood by, and referred to the expected train, which ought to have been in some minutes before. According to the precise time, as laid down in the way-bills, it should reach Calne seven minutes before six.

"They have a heavy load, perhaps," remarked the station-master.

The train was chiefly for goods; a slow train, taking no one knew how many hours to travel from London. It would bring passengers also; but very few availed themselves of it. Now and then it happened that the station at Calne was opened for nothing; the train just slackened its speed and went on, leaving neither goods nor anything else behind it. Sometimes it took a few early travellers from Calne to Garchester; especially on Wednesdays and Saturdays, Garchester market-days; but it rarely left passengers at Calne.

"Did you hear the news, Mr. Markham?" asked the porter.

"What news?" returned the station-master.

"I heard it last night. Jim come into the Elster Arms with it, and *he'd* heard it at Garchester. We are going to have two more sets o' telegraph wires here. I wonder how much more work they'll give us to do?"

"So you were at the Elster Arms again last night, Jones?" remarked the station-master, his tone reproving, whilst he passed over in silence Mr. Jones's item of news.

"I wasn't in above an hour," grumbled the man.

"Well, it is your own look-out, Jones. I have said what I could to you at odd times; but I believe it has only tried your patience; so I'll say no more."

"Has my wife been here again complaining?" asked the man, raising his face in anger.

"No; I have not seen your wife, except at church, these two months. But I know what public-houses are to you, and I was thinking of your little children."

"Ugh!" growled the man, apparently not gratified at the reminder of his flock; "there's a peck o' *them* surely! Here she comes!"

The last sentence was spoken in a different tone; one of relief, either at getting rid of the subject, or at the arrival of the train. It was about opposite to Hartledon when he caught sight of it, and it came on with a shrill whistle, skirting the village it towered above; a long line of covered waggons with a passenger carriage or two attached to them. Slackening its pace gradually, but not in time, it shot past the station, and had to back into it again.

The guard came out of his box and opened the door of one of the carriages—a dirty-looking second-class compartment; the other was a third-class; and a gentleman leaped out. A tall, slender man of about four-and-twenty; a man evidently of birth and breeding. He wore a light summer overcoat on his well-cut clothes, and had a most attractive face.

"Is there any law against putting on a first-class carriage to this night-train?" he asked the guard in a pleasing voice.

"Well, sir, we never get first-class passengers by it," replied the man; "or hardly any passengers at all, for the matter of that. We are too long on the road for passengers to come by us."

"It might happen, though," returned the traveller, significantly. "At any rate, I suppose there's no law against your carriages being clean, whatever their class. Look at that one."

He pointed to the one he had just left, as he walked up to the station-master. The guard looked cross, and gave the carriage door a slam.

"Was a portmanteau left here last night by the last train from London?" inquired the traveller of the station-master.

"No, sir; nothing was left here. At least, I think not. Any name on it, sir?"

"Elster."

A quick glance from the station-master's eyes met the answer. Elster was the name of the family at Hartledon. He wondered whether this could be one of them, or whether the name was merely a coincidence.

"There was no portmanteau left, was there, Jones?" asked the station-master.

"There couldn't have been," returned the porter, touching his cap to the stranger. "I wasn't on last night; Jim was; but it would have been put in the office for sure; and there's not a ghost of a thing in it this morning."

"It must have been taken on to Garchester," remarked the traveller; and, turning to the guard, he gave him directions to look after it, and despatch it back again by the first train, slipping at the same time a gratuity into his hand.

The guard touched his hat humbly; he now knew who the gentleman was. And he went into inward repentance for slamming the carriage-door, as he got into his box, and the engine and train puffed on.

"You'll send it up as soon as it comes," said the traveller to the station-master.

"Where to, sir?"

The stranger raised his eyes in slight surprise, and pointed to the house in the distance. He had assumed that he was known.

"To Hartledon."

Then he *was* one of the family! The station-master touched his hat. Mr. Jones, in the background, touched his, and for the first time the traveller's eye fell upon him as he was turning to leave the platform.

"Why, Jones! It's never you?"

"Yes, it is, sir." But Mr. Jones looked abashed as he acknowledged himself. And it may be observed that his language, when addressing this gentleman, was a slight improvement upon the homely phraseology of his everyday life.

"But—you are surely not working here!—a porter!"

"My business fell through, sir," returned the man. "I'm here till I can turn myself round, sir, and get into it again."

"What caused it to fall through?" asked the traveller; a kindly sympathy in his fine blue eyes.

Mr. Jones shuffled upon one foot. He would not have given the true answer—"Drinking"—for the world.

"There's such opposition started up in the place, sir; folks would draw your heart's blood from you if they could. And then I've such a lot of mouths to feed. I can't think what the plague such a tribe of children come for. Nobody wants 'em."

The traveller laughed; but put no further questions. Remembering somewhat of Mr. Jones's propensity in the old days, he thought perhaps something besides children and opposition had had to do with the downfall. He stood for a moment looking at the station which had not been completed when he last saw it—and a very pretty station it was, surrounded by its gay flowerbeds—and then went down the road.

"I suppose he is one of the Hartledon family, Jones?" said the station-master, looking after him.

"He's the earl's brother," replied Mr. Jones, relapsing into sulkiness. "There's only them two left; t'other died. Wonder if they be coming to Hartledon again? Calne haven't seemed the same since they left it."

"Which is this one?"

"He can't be anybody but himself," retorted Mr. Jones, irascibly, deeming the question superfluous. "There be but the two left, I say—the earl and him; everybody knows him for the Honourable Percival Elster. The other son, George, died; leastways, was murdered."

"Murdered!" echoed the station-master aghast.

"I don't see that it could be called much else but murder," was Mr. Jones's answer. "He went out with my lord's gamekeepers one night and got shot in a poaching fray. 'Twas never known for certain who fired the shot, but I think I could put my finger on the man if I tried. Much good *that* would do, though! There's no proof."

"What are you saying, Jones?" cried the station-master, staring at his subordinate, and perhaps wondering whether he had already that morning paid a visit to the tap of the Elster Arms.

"I'm saying nothing that half the place didn't say at the time, Mr. Markham. *You* hadn't come here then, Mr. Elster—he was the Honourable George—went out one night with the keepers when warm work was expected, and got shot for his pains. He lived some weeks, but they couldn't cure him. It was in the late lord's time. *He* died soon after, and the place has been deserted ever since."

"And who do you suppose fired the shot?"

"Don't know that it 'ud be safe to say," rejoined the man. "He might give my neck a twist some dark night if he heard on't. He's the blackest sheep we've got in Calne, sir."

"I suppose you mean Pike," said the station-master. "He has the character for being that, I believe. I've seen no harm in the man myself."

"Well, it was Pike," said the porter. "That is, some of us suspected him. And that's how Mr. George Elster came by his death. And this one, Mr. Percival, shot up into notice, as being the only one left, except Lord Elster."

"And who's Lord Elster?" asked the station-master, not remembering to have heard the title before.

Mr. Jones received the question with proper contempt. Having been familiar with Hartledon and its inmates all his life, he had as little compassion for those who were not so, as he would have had for a man who did not understand that Garchester was in England.

"The present Earl of Hartledon," said he, shortly. "In his father's lifetime—and the old lord lived to see Mr. George buried—he was Lord Elster. Not one of my tribe of brats but could tell that any Lord Elster must be the eldest son of the Earl of Hartledon," he concluded with a fling at his superior.

"Ah, well, I have had other things to do since I came here besides inquiring into titles and folks that don't concern me," remarked the station-master. "What a good-looking man he is!"

The praise applied to Mr. Elster, after whom he was throwing a parting look. Jones gave an ungracious assent, and turned into the shed where the lamps were kept, to begin his morning's work.

All the world would have been ready to echo the station-master's words as to the good looks of Percival Elster, known universally amidst his friends as Val Elster; for these good looks did not lie so much in actual beauty—which one lauds, and another denies, according to its style—as in the singularly pleasant expression of countenance; a gift that finds its weight with all.

He possessed a bright face; his complexion was fair and fresh, his eyes were blue and smiling, his features were good; and as he walked down the road, and momentarily lifted his hat to push his light hair—as much of a golden colour as hair ever is—from his brow, and gave a cordial "good-day" to those who met him on their way to work—few strangers but would have given him a second look of admiration. A physiognomist might have found fault with the face; and, whilst admitting its sweet expression, would have condemned it for its utter want of resolution. What of that? The inability to say "no" to any sort of persuasion, whether for good or ill; in short, a total absence of what may be called moral courage; had been from his childhood Val Elster's besetting sin.

There was a joke against little Val when he was a boy of seven. Some playmates had insisted upon his walking into a pond, and standing there. Poor Val, quite unable to say "no," walked in, and was nearly drowned for his pains. It had been a joke against him then; how many such "jokes" could have been brought against him since he grew up, Val himself could alone tell. As the child had been, so was the man. The scrapes his irresolution brought him into he did not care to glance at; and whilst only too well aware of his one lamentable deficiency, he was equally aware that he was powerless to stand against it.

People, in speaking of this, called it "Elster's Folly." His extreme sensitiveness as to the feelings of other people, whether equals or inferiors, was, in a degree, one of the causes of this yielding nature; and he would almost rather have died than offer any one a personal offence, an insulting word or

look. There are such characters in the world; none can deny that they are amiable; but, oh, how unfit to battle with life!

Mr. Elster walked slowly through the village on his way to Hartledon, whose inmates he would presently take by surprise. It was about twenty months since he had been there. He had left Hartledon at the close of the last winter but one; an appointment having been obtained for him as an *attaché* to the Paris embassy. Ten months of service, and some scrape he fell into caused him (a good deal of private interest was brought to bear in the matter) to be removed to Vienna; but he had not remained there very long. He seemed to have a propensity for getting into trouble, or rather an inability to keep out of it. Latterly he had been staying in London with his brother.

His thoughts wandered to the past as he looked at the chimneys of Hartledon—all he could see of it—from the low-lying ground. He remembered the happy time when they had been children in it; five of them—the three boys and the two girls—he himself the youngest and the pet. His eldest sister, Margaret, had been the first to leave it. She married Sir James Cooper, and went with him to his remote home in Scotland, where she was still. The second to go was Laura, who married Captain Level, and accompanied him to India. Then he, Val, a young man in his teens, went out into the world, and did all sorts of harm in it in an unintentional sort of way; for Percival Elster never did wrong by premeditation. Next came the death of his mother. He was called home from a sojourn in Scotland—where his stay had been prolonged from the result of an accident—to bid her farewell. Then he was at home for a year or more, making love to charming Anne Ashton. The next move was his departure for Paris; close upon which, within a fortnight, occurred the calamity to his brother George. He came back from Paris to see him in London, whither George had been conveyed for medical advice, and there then seemed a chance of his recovery; but it was not borne out, and the ill-fated young man died. Lord Hartledon's death was the next. He had an incurable complaint, and his death followed close upon his son's. Lord Elster became Earl of Hartledon; and he, Val, heir-presumptive. Heir-presumptive! Val Elster was heir to all sorts of follies, but—

"Good morning to your lordship!"

The speaker was a man in a smock-frock, passing with a reaping-hook on his shoulder. Mr. Elster's sunny face and cheery voice gave back the salutation with tenfold heartiness, smiling at the title. Half the peasantry had been used to addressing the brothers so, indiscriminately; they were all lords to them.

The interruption awoke Mr. Elster from his thoughts, and he marched gaily on down the middle of the road, noting its familiar features. The small shops were on his right hand, the line of rails behind them. A few white villas lay scattered on his left, and beyond them, but not to be seen from this village street, wound the river; both running parallel with the village lying between them. Soon the houses ceased; it was a small place at best; and after an open space came the church. It lay on his right, a little way back from the road, and surrounded by a large churchyard. Almost opposite, on the other side of the road, but much further back, was a handsome modern white house; its delightful gardens sloping almost to the river. This was the residence of the Rector, Dr. Ashton, a wealthy man and a church dignitary, prebendary and sub-dean of Garchester Cathedral. Percival Elster looked at it yearningly, if haply he might see there the face of one he loved well; but the blinds were drawn, and the inmates were no doubt steeped in repose.

"If she only knew I was here!" he fondly aspirated.

On again a few steps, and a slight turn in the road brought him to a small red-brick house on the same side as the church, with green shutters attached to its lower windows. It lay in the midst of a garden well stocked with vegetables, fruit, and the more ordinary and brighter garden-flowers. A straight path led to the well-kept house-door, its paint fresh and green, and its brass-plate as bright as rubbing could make it. Mr. Elster could not read the inscription on the plate from where he was, but he knew it by heart: "Jabez Gum, Parish Clerk." And there was a smaller plate indicating other offices held by Jabez Gum.

"I wonder if Jabez is as shadowy as ever?" thought Mr. Elster, as he walked on.

One more feature, and that is the last you shall hear of until Hartledon is reached. Close to the clerk's garden, on a piece of waste land, stood a small wooden building, no better than a shed.

It had once been a stable, but so long as Percival Elster could remember, it was nothing but a receptacle for schoolboys playing at hide-and-seek. Many a time had he hidden there. Something different in this shed now caught his eye; the former doorway had been boarded up, and a long iron tube, like a thin chimney, ascended from its roof.

"Who on earth has been adding that to it?" exclaimed Mr. Elster.

A little way onward, and he came to the lodge-gates of Hartledon. The house was on the same side as the Rectory, its park stretching eastward, its grounds, far more beautiful and extensive than those of the Rectory, descending to the river. As he went in at the smaller side-gate, he turned his gaze on the familiar road he had quitted, and most distinctly saw a wreath of smoke ascending from the pipe above the shed. Could it be a chimney, after all?

The woman of the lodge, hearing footsteps, came to her door with hasty words.

"Now then! What makes you so late this morning? Didn't I—" And there she stopped in horror; transfixed; for she was face to face with Mr. Elster.

"Law, sir! *You!* Mercy be good to us!"

He laughed. In her consternation she could only suppose he had dropped from the clouds. Giving her a pleasant greeting, he drew her attention to the appearance that was puzzling him. The woman came out and looked at it.

"Is it a chimney, Mrs. Capper?"

"Well, yes, sir, it be. Pike have put it in. He come here, nobody knew how or when, he put himself into the old shed, and has never left it again."

"Who is 'Pike'?"

"It's hard to say, sir; a many would give a deal to know. He lay in the shed a bit at first, as it were, all open. Then he boarded up that front doorway, opened a door at the back, cut out a square hole for a window, and stuck that chimney in the roof. And there he's lived ever since, and nobody interferes with him. His name's Pike, and that's all that's known. I should think my lord will see to it when he comes."

"Does he work for his living?"

"Never does a stroke o' work for nobody, sir. And how he lives is just one o' them mysteries that can't be dived into. He's a poacher, a snarer, and a robber of the fishponds—any one of 'em when he gets the chance; leastways it's said so; and he looks just like a wild man o' the woods; wilder than any Robison Crusoe! And he—but you might not like me to mention that, sir."

"Mention anything," replied Mr. Elster. "Go on."

"Well, sir, it's said by some that his was the shot that killed Mr. George," she returned, dropping her voice; and Percival Elster started.

"Who is he?" he exclaimed.

"He is not known to a soul. He came here a stranger."

"But—he was not here when I left home. And I left it, you may remember, only a few days before that night."

"He must have come here at that very time, sir; just as you left."

"But what grounds were there for supposing that he—that he—I think you must be mistaken, Mrs. Capper. Lord Hartledon, I am sure, knows nothing of this suspicion."

"I never heard nothing about grounds, sir," simply replied the woman. "I suppose folks fastened it on him because he's a loose character: and his face is all covered with hair, like a howl."

He almost laughed again as he turned away, dismissing the suspicion she had hinted at as unworthy a moment's credit. The broad gravel-walk through this portion of the park was very short, and the large grey-stone house was soon reached. Not to the stately front entrance did he bend his

steps, but to a small side entrance, which he found open. Pursuing his way down sundry passages, he came to what used to be called the "west kitchen;" and there sat three women at breakfast.

"Well, Mirrable! I thought I should find you up."

The two servants seated opposite stared with open mouths; neither knew him: the one he had addressed as Mirrable turned at the salutation, screamed, and dropped the teapot. She was a thin, active woman, of forty years, with dark eyes, a bunch of black drooping ringlets between her cap and her thin cheeks, a ready tongue and a pleasant manner. Mirrable had been upper maid at Hartledon for years and years, and was privileged.

"Mr. Percival! Is it your ghost, sir?"

"I think it's myself, Mirrable."

"My goodness! But, sir, how did you get here?"

"You may well ask. I ought to have been here last night, but got out at some obscure junction to obtain a light for my cigar, and the train went on without me. I sat on a bench for a few hours, and came on by the goods train this morning."

Mirrable awoke from her astonishment, sent the two girls flying, one here, one there, to prepare rooms for Mr. Elster, and busied herself arranging the best breakfast she could extemporise. Val Elster sat on a table whilst he talked to her. In the old days, he and his brothers, little fellows, had used to carry their troubles to Mirrable; and he was just as much at home with her now as he would have been with his mother.

"Did Capper see you as you came by, sir? Wouldn't she be struck!"

"Nearly into stone," he laughed.

Mirrable disappeared for a minute or two, and came back with a silver coffee-pot in her hand. The name of the lodge-keeper had brought to his remembrance the unpleasant hint she mentioned, and he spoke of it impulsively—as he did most things.

"Mirrable, what man is it they call Pike, who has taken possession of that old shed?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," answered Mirrable, after a pause, which Mr. Elster thought was involuntary; for she was busy at the moment rubbing the coffee-pot with some wash-leather, her head and face bent over it, as she stood with her back to him. He slipped off the table, and went up to her.

"I saw smoke rising from the shed, and asked Capper what it meant, and she told me about this man Pike. Pike! It's a curious name."

Mirrable rubbed away, never answering.

"Capper said he had been suspected of firing the shot that killed my brother," he continued, in low tones. "Did *you* ever hear of such a hint, Mirrable?"

Mirrable darted off to the fireplace, and began stirring the milk lest it should boil over. Her face was almost buried in the saucepan, or Mr. Elster might have seen the sudden change that came over it; the thin cheeks that had flushed crimson, and now were deadly white. Lifting the saucepan on to the hob, she turned to Mr. Elster.

"Don't you believe any such nonsense, sir," she said, in tones of strange emphasis. "It was no more Pike than it was me. The man keeps himself to himself, and troubles nobody; and for that very reason idle folk carp at him, like the mischief-making idiots they are!"

"I thought there was nothing in it," remarked Mr. Elster.

"I'm *sure* there isn't," said Mirrable, conclusively. "Would you like some broiled ham, sir?"

"I should like anything good and substantial, for I'm as hungry as a hunter. But, Mirrable, you don't ask what has brought me here so suddenly."

The tone was significant, and Mirrable looked at him. There was a spice of mischief in his laughing blue eyes.

"I come on a mission to you; an avant-courier from his lordship, to charge you to have all things in readiness. To-morrow you will receive a houseful of company; more than Hartledon will hold."

Mirrable looked aghast. "It is one of your jokes, Mr. Val!"

"Indeed, it is the truth. My brother will be down with a trainful; and desires that everything shall be ready for their reception."

"My patience!" gasped Mirrable. "And the servants, sir?"

"Most of them will be here to-night. The Countess-Dowager of Kirton is coming as Hartledon's mistress for the time being."

"Oh!" said Mirrable, who had once had the honour of seeing the Countess-Dowager of Kirton. And the monosyllable was so significant that Val Elster drew down the corners of his mouth.

"I don't like the Countess-Dowager, sir," remarked Mirrable in her freedom.

"I can't bear her," returned Val Elster.

CHAPTER II. WILLY GUM

Had Percival Elster lingered ever so short a time near the clerk's house that morning he would have met that functionary himself; for in less than a minute after he had passed out of sight Jabez Gum's door opened, and Jabez Gum glided out of it.

It is a term chiefly applied to ghosts; but Mr. Gum was a great deal more like a ghost than like a man. He was remarkably tall and thin; a very shadow; with a white shadow of a face, and a nose that might have served as a model for a mask in a carnival of guys. A sharp nose, twice the length and half the breadth of any ordinary nose—a very ferret of a nose; its sharp tip standing straight out into the air. People said, with such a nose Mr. Gum ought to have a great deal of curiosity. And they were right; he *had* a great deal in a quiet way.

A most respectable man was Mr. Gum, and he prided himself upon it. Mr. Gum—more often called Clerk Gum in the village—had never done a wrong thing in his life, or fallen into a scrape. He had been altogether a pattern to Calne in general, and to its black sheep in particular. Dr. Ashton himself could not have had less brought against him than Clerk Gum; and it would just have broken Mr. Gum's heart had his good name been tarnished in ever so slight a degree. Perhaps no man living had been born with a larger share of self-esteem than Jabez Gum. Clerk of the parish longer than Dr. Ashton had been its Rector, Jabez Gum had lived at his ease in a pecuniary point of view. It was one of those parishes (I think few of them remain now) where the clerk's emoluments are large. He also held other offices; was an agent for one or two companies, and was looked upon as an exceedingly substantial man for his station in life. Perhaps he was less so than people imagined. The old saying is all too true: "Nobody knows where the shoe pinches but he who wears it."

Jabez Gum had his thorn, as a great many more of us have ours, if the outside world only knew it. And Jabez, at odd moments, when the thorn pierced him very sharply, had been wont to compare his condition to St. Paul's, and to wonder whether the pricks inflicted on that holy man could have bled as his own did. He meant no irreverence when he thought this; neither do I in writing it. We are generally wounded in the most vulnerable spot about us, and Jabez Gum made no exception to the rule. He had been assailed in his cherished respectability, his self-esteem. Assailed and *scarred*. How broad and deep the scar was Jabez never told the world, which as a rule does not sympathise with such scars, but turns aside in its cruel indifference. The world had almost forgotten the scar now, and supposed Clerk Gum had done the same. It was all over and done with years ago.

Jabez Gum's wife—to whom you will shortly have the honour of an introduction, but she is in her bedroom just now—had borne him one child, and only one. How this boy was loved, how tenderly reared, let Calne tell you. Mrs. Gum had to endure no inconsiderable amount of ridicule at the time from her gossiping friends, who gave Willy sundry endearing names, applied in derision. Certainly, if any mother ever was bound up in a child, Mrs. Gum was in hers. The boy was well brought up. A good education was given him; and at the age of sixteen he went to London and to fortune. The one was looked upon as a natural sequence to the other. Some friend of Jabez Gum's had interested himself to procure the lad's admission into one of the great banks as a junior clerk. He might rise in time to be cashier, manager, even partner; who knew? Who knew indeed? And Clerk Gum congratulated himself, and was more respectable than ever.

Better that Willy Gum had remained at Calne! And yet, and again—who knew? When the propensity for ill-doing exists it is sure to come out, no matter where. There were some people in Calne who could have told Clerk Gum, even then, that Willy, for his age, was tolerably fast and forward. Mrs. Gum had heard of one or two things that had caused her hair to rise on end with horror;

ay, and with apprehension; but, foolish mother that she was, not a syllable did she breathe to the clerk; and no one else ventured to tell him.

She talked to Willy with many sighs and tears; implored him to be a good boy and enter on good courses, not on bad ones that would break her heart. Willy, the little scapegrace, was willing to promise anything. He laughed and made light of it; it wasn't his fault if folks told stories about him; she couldn't be so foolish as to give ear to them. London? Oh, he should be all right in London! One or two fellows here were rather fast, there was no denying it; and they drew him with them; they were older than he, and ought to have known better. Once away from Calne, they could have no more influence over him, and he should be all right.

She believed him; putting faith in the plausible words. Oh, what trust can be so pure, and at the same time so foolish, as that placed by a mother in a beloved son! Mrs. Gum had never known but one idol on earth; he who now stood before her, lightly laughing at her fears, making his own tale good. She leaned forward and laid her hands upon his shoulders and kissed him with that impassioned fervour that some mothers could tell of, and whispered that she would trust him wholly.

Mr. Willy extricated himself with as little impatience as he could help: these embraces were not to his taste. And yet the boy did love his mother. She was not at all a wise woman, or a clever one; rather silly, indeed, in many things; but she was fond of him. At this period he was young-looking for his age, slight, and rather undersized, with an exceedingly light complexion, a wishy-washy sort of face with no colour in it, unmeaning light eyes, white eyebrows, and ragged-looking light hair with a tawny shade upon it.

Willy Gum departed for London, and entered on his engagement in the great banking-house of Goldsworthy and Co.

How he went on in it Calne could not get to learn, though it was moderately inquisitive upon the point. His father and mother heard from him occasionally; and once the clerk took a sudden and rather mysterious journey to London, where he stayed for a whole week. Rumour said—I wonder where such rumours first have their rise—that Willy Gum had fallen into some trouble, and the clerk had had to buy him out of it at the cost of a mint of money. The clerk, however, did not confirm this; and one thing was indisputable: Willy retained his place in the banking-house. Some people looked on this fact as a complete refutation of the rumour.

Then came a lull. Nothing was heard of Willy; that is, nothing beyond the reports of Mrs. Gum to her gossips when letters arrived: he was well, and getting on well. It was only the lull that precedes a storm; and a storm indeed burst on quiet Calne. Willy Gum had robbed the bank and disappeared.

In the first dreadful moment, perhaps the only one who did *not* disbelieve it was Clerk Gum. Other people said there must be some mistake: it could not be. Kind old Lord Hartledon came down in his carriage to the clerk's house—he was too ill to walk—and sat with the clerk and the weeping mother, and said he was sure it could not be so bad as was reported. The next morning saw handbills—great, staring, large-typed handbills—offering a reward for the discovery of William Gum, posted all over Calne.

Once more Clerk Gum went to London. What he did there no one knew. One thing only was certain—he did not find Willy or any trace of him. The defalcation was very nearly eight hundred pounds; and even if Mr. Gum could have refunded that large sum, he might not do so, said Calne, for of course the bank would not compound a felony. He came back looking ten years older; his tall, thin form more shadowy, his nose longer and sharper. Not a soul ventured to say a syllable to him, even of condolence. He told Lord Hartledon and his Rector that no tidings whatever could be gleaned of his unhappy son; the boy had disappeared, and might be dead for all they knew to the contrary.

So the handbills wore themselves out on the walls, serving no purpose, until Lord Hartledon ordered them to be removed; and Mrs. Gum lived in tears, and audibly wished herself dead. She had not seen her boy since he quitted Calne, considerably more than two years before, and he was now nearly nineteen. A few days' holiday had been accorded him by the banking-house each Christmas;

but the first Christmas Willy wrote word that he had accepted an invitation to go home with a brother-clerk; the second Christmas he said he could not obtain leave of absence—which Mrs. Gum afterwards found was untrue; so that Willy Gum had not been at Calne since he left it. And whenever his mother thought of him—and that was every hour of the day and night—it was always as the fair, young, light-haired boy, who seemed to her little more than a child.

A year or so of uncertainty, of suspense, of wailing, and then came a letter from Willy, cautiously sent. It was not addressed directly to Mrs. Gum, to whom it was written, but to one of Willy's acquaintances in London, who enclosed it in an envelope and forwarded it on.

Such a letter! To read it one might have thought Mr. William Gum had gone out under the most favourable auspices. He was in Australia; had gone up to seek his fortune at the gold-diggings, and was making money rapidly. In a short time he should refund with interest the little sum he had borrowed from Goldsworthy and Co., and which was really not taken with any ill intention, but was more an accident than anything else. After that, he should accumulate money on his own score, and—all things being made straight at home—return and settle down, a rich man for life. And she—his mother—might rely on his keeping his word. At present he was at Melbourne; to which place he and his mates had come to bring their acquired gold, and to take a bit of a spree after their recent hard work. He was very jolly, and after a week's holiday they should go back again. And he hoped his father had overlooked the past; and he remained ever her affectionate son, William Gum.

The effect of this letter upon Mrs. Gum was as though a dense cloud had suddenly lifted from the world, and given place to a flood of sunshine. We estimate things by comparison. Mrs. Gum was by nature disposed to look on the dark side of things, and she had for the whole year past been indulging the most dread pictures of Willy and his fate that any woman's mind ever conceived. To hear that he was in life, and well, and making money rapidly, was the sweetest news, the greatest relief she could ever experience in this world.

Clerk Gum—relieved also, no doubt—received the tidings in a more sober spirit; almost as if he did not dare to believe in them. The man's heart had been well-nigh broken with the blow that fell upon him, and nothing could ever heal it thoroughly again. He read the letter in silence; read it twice over; and when his wife broke out into a series of rapt congratulations, and reproached him mildly for not appearing to think it true, he rather cynically inquired what then, if true, became of her dreams.

For Mrs. Gum was a dreamer. She was one of those who are now and again visited by strange dreams, significant of the future. Poor Mrs. Gum carried these dreams to an excess; that is, she was always having them and always talking about them. It had been no wonder, with her mind in so miserable a state regarding her son, that her dreams in that first twelve-month had generally been of him and generally bad. The above question, put by her husband, somewhat puzzled her. Her dreams *had* foreshadowed great evil still to Willy; and her dreams had never been wrong yet.

But, in the enjoyment of positive good, who thinks of dreams? No one. And Mrs. Gum's grew a shade brighter, and hope again took possession of her heart.

Two years rolled on, during which they heard twice from Willy; satisfactory letters still, in a way. Both testified to his "jolly" state: he was growing rich, though not quite so rapidly as he had anticipated; a fellow had to spend so much! Every day he expected to pick up a nugget which would crown his fortune. He complained in these letters that he did not hear from home; not once had news reached him; had his father and mother abandoned him?

The question brought forth a gush of tears from Mrs. Gum, and a sharp abuse of the post-office. The clerk took the news philosophically, remarking that the wonder would have been had Willy received the letters, seeing that he seemed to move about incessantly from place to place.

Close upon this came another letter, written apparently in haste. Willy's "fortune" had turned into reality at last; he was coming home with more gold than he could count; had taken his berth in the good ship *Morning Star*, and should come off at once to Calne, when the ship reached Liverpool. There was a line written inside the envelope, as though he had forgotten to include it in the letter: "I

have had one from you at last; the first you wrote, it seems. Thank dad for what he has done for me. I'll make it all square with him when I get home."

This had reference to a fact which Calne did not know. In that unhappy second visit of Clerk Gum's to London, he *did* succeed in appeasing the wrath of Goldsworthy and Co., and paid in every farthing of the money. How far he might have accomplished this but for being backed by the urgent influence of old Lord Hartledon, was a question. One thing was in his favour: the firm had not taken any steps whatever in the matter, and those handbills circulated at Calne were the result of a misapprehension on the part of an officious local police-officer. Things had gone too far for Goldsworthys graciously to condone the offence—and Clerk Gum paid in his savings of years. This was the fact written by Mrs. Gum to her son, which had called forth the line in the envelope.

Alas! those were the last tidings ever received from Willy Gum. Whilst Mrs. Gum lived in a state of ecstasy, showing the letter to her neighbours and making loving preparations for his reception, the time for the arrival of the *Morning Star* at Liverpool drew on, and passed, and the ship did not arrive.

A time of anxious suspense to all who had relations on board—for it was supposed she had foundered at sea—and tidings came to them. An awful tale; a tale of mutiny and wrong and bloodshed. Some of the loose characters on board the ship—and she was bringing home such—had risen in disorder within a month of their sailing from Melbourne; had killed the captain, the chief officer, and some of the passengers and crew.

The ringleader was a man named Gordon; who had incited the rest to the crime, and killed the captain with his own hand. Obtaining command of the ship, they put her about, and commenced a piratical raid. One vessel they succeeded in disarming, despoiling, and then leaving her to her fate. But the next vessel they attacked proved a more formidable enemy, and there was a hand-to-hand struggle for the mastery, and for life or death. The *Morning Star* was sunk, with the greater portion of her living freight. A few, only some four or five, were saved by the other ship, and conveyed to England.

It was by them the dark tale was brought. The second officer of the *Morning Star* was one of them; he had been compelled to dissemble and to appear to serve the mutinous band; the others were innocent passengers, whose lives had not been taken. All agreed in one thing: that Gordon, the ringleader, had in all probability escaped. He had put off from the *Morning Star*, when she was sinking, in one of her best boats; he and some of his lawless helpmates, with a bag of biscuit, a cask of water, and a few bottles that probably contained rum. Whether they succeeded in reaching a port or in getting picked up, was a question; but it was assumed they had done so.

The owners of the *Morning Star*, half paralyzed at the news of so daring and unusual an outrage, offered the large reward of five hundred pounds for the capture of George Gordon; and Government increased the offer by two hundred, making it seven in all.

Overwhelming tidings for Clerk Gum and his wife! A brief season of agonized suspense ensued for the poor mother; of hopes and fears as to whether Willy was amongst the remnant saved; and then hope died away, for he did not come.

Once more, for the last time, Clerk Gum took a journey, not to London, but to Liverpool. He succeeded in seeing the officer who had been saved; but he could give him no information. He knew the names of the first-class passengers, but only a few of the second-class; and in that class Willy had most likely sailed.

The clerk described his son; and the officer thought he remembered him: he had a good deal of gold on board, he said. One of the passengers spoke more positively. Yes, by Clerk Gum's description, he was sure Willy Gum had been his fellow-passenger in the second cabin, though he did not recollect whether he had heard his name. It seemed, looking back, that the passengers had hardly had time to become acquainted with each other's names, he added. He was sure it was the young man; of very light complexion, ready and rather loose (if Mr. Gum would excuse his saying so) in speech. He had made thoroughly good hauls of gold at the last, and was going home to spend it. He was the second

killed, poor fellow; had risen up with a volley of oaths (excuses begged again) to defend the captain, and was struck down and killed.

Poor Jabez Gum gasped. *Killed?* was the gentleman *sure*? Quite sure; and, moreover, he saw his body thrown overboard with the rest of the dead. And the money—the gold? Jabez asked, when he had somewhat recovered himself. The passenger laughed—not at the poor father, but at the worse than useless question; gold and everything else on board the *Morning Star* had gone down with her to the bottom of the sea.

A species of savage impulse rose in the clerk's mind, replacing his first emotion of grief; an impulse that might almost have led him to murder the villain Gordon, could he have come across him. Was there a chance that the man would be taken? he asked. Every chance, if he dared show his face in England, the passenger answered. A reward of seven hundred pounds was an inducement to the survivors to keep their eyes open; and they'd do it, besides, without any reward. Moreover—if Gordon had escaped, his comrades in the boat had escaped with him. They were lawless men like himself, every one of them, and they would be sure to betray him when they found what a price was set upon his capture.

Clerk Gum returned home, bearing to his wife and Calne the final tidings which crushed out all hope. Mrs. Gum sank into a state of wild despair. At first it almost seemed to threaten loss of reason. Her son had been her sole idol, and the idol was shattered. But to witness unreasonably violent grief in others always has a counteracting effect on our own, and Mr. Gum soothed his sorrow and brought philosophy to his aid.

"Look you," said he, one day, sharply to his wife, when she was crying and moaning, "there's two sides to every calamity,—a bright and a dark 'un;" for Mr. Gum was not in the habit of treating his wife, in the privacy of their domestic circle, to the quality-speech kept for the world. "He is gone, and we can't help it; we'd have welcomed him home if we could, and killed the fatted calf, but it was God's will that it shouldn't be. There may be a blessing in it, after all. Who knows but he might have broke out again, and brought upon us what he did before, or worse? For my part, I should never have been without the fear; night and morning it would always have stood before me; not to be driven away. As it is, I am at rest."

She—the wife—took her apron from her eyes and looked at him with a sort of amazed anger.

"Gum! do you forget that he had left off his evil ways, and was coming home to be a comfort to us?"

"No, I don't forget it," returned Mr. Gum. "But who was to say that the mood would last? He might have got through his gold, however much it was, and then—. As it is, Nance Gum, we can sleep quiet in our beds, free from *that* fear."

Clerk Gum was not, on the whole, a model of suavity in the domestic fold. The first blow that had fallen upon him seemed to have affected his temper; and his helpmate knew from experience that whenever he called her "Nance" his mood was at its worst.

Suppressing a sob, she spoke reproachfully.

"It's my firm belief, Gum, and has been all along, that you cared more for your good name among men than you did for the boy."

"Perhaps I did," he answered, by way of retort. "At any rate, it might have been better for him in the long-run if we—both you and me—hadn't cared for him quite so foolishly in his childhood; we spared the rod and we spoiled the child. That's over, and—"

"It's *all* over," interrupted Mrs. Gum; "over for ever in this world. Gum, you are very hard-hearted."

"And," he continued, with composure, "we may hope now to live down in time the blow he brought upon us, and hold up our heads again in the face of Calne. We couldn't have done that while he lived."

"We couldn't?"

"No. Just dry up your useless tears, Nancy; and try to think that all's for the best."

But, metaphorically speaking, Mrs. Gum could not dry her tears. Nearly two years had elapsed since the fatal event; and though she no longer openly lamented, filling Calne with her cries and her faint but heartfelt prayers for vengeance on the head of the cruel monster, George Gordon, as she used to do at first, she had sunk into a despairing state of mind that was by no means desirable: a startled, timid, superstitious woman, frightened at every shadow.

CHAPTER III. ANNE ASHTON

Jabez Gum came out of his house in the bright summer morning, missing Mr. Elster by one minute only. He went round to a small shed at the back of the house and brought forth sundry garden-tools. The whole garden was kept in order by himself, and no one had finer fruit and vegetables than Clerk Gum. Hartledon might have been proud of them, and Dr. Ashton sometimes accepted a dish with pleasure.

In his present attire: dark trousers, and a short close jacket buttoned up round him and generally worn when gardening, the worthy man might decidedly have been taken for an animated lamp-post by any stranger who happened to come that way. He was applying himself this morning, first to the nailing of sundry choice fruit-trees against the wall that ran down one side of his garden—a wall that had been built by the clerk himself in happier days; and next, to plucking some green walnuts for his wife to pickle. As he stood on tip-toe, his long thin body and long thin arms stretched up to the walnut-tree, he might have made the fortune of any travelling caravan that could have hired him. The few people who passed him greeted him with a "Good morning," but he rarely turned his head in answering them. Clerk Gum had grown somewhat taciturn of late years.

The time went on. The clock struck a quarter-past seven, and Jabez Gum, as he heard it, left the walnut-tree, walked to the gate, and leaned over it; his face turned in the direction of the village. It was not the wooden gate generally attached to smaller houses in rustic localities, but a very pretty iron one; everything about the clerk's house being of a superior order. Apparently, he was looking out for some one in displeasure; and, indeed, he had not stood there a minute, when a girl came flying down the road, and pushed the gate and the clerk back together.

Mr. Gum directed her attention to the church clock. "Do you see the time, Rebecca Jones?"

Had the pages of the church-register been visible as well as the clock, Miss Rebecca Jones's age might have been seen to be fifteen; but, in knowledge of the world and in impudence, she was considerably older.

"Just gone seven and a quarter," answered she, making a feint of shading her eyes with her hands, though the sun was behind her.

"And what business have you to come at seven and a quarter? Half-past six is your time; and, if you can't keep it, your missis shall get those that can."

"Why can't my missis let me stop at night and clear up the work?" returned the girl. "She sends me away at six o'clock, as soon as I've washed the tea-things, and oftentimes earlier than that. It stands to reason I can't get through the work of a morning."

"You could do so quite well if you came to time," said the clerk, turning away to his walnut-tree. "Why don't you?"

"I overslept myself this morning. Father never called me afore he went out. No doubt he had a drop too much last night."

She went flying up the gravel-path as she spoke. Her father was the man Jones whom you saw at the railway station; her step-mother (for her own mother was dead) was Mrs. Gum's cousin.

She was a sort of stray sheep, this girl, in the eyes of Calne, not belonging very much to any one; her father habitually neglected her, her step-mother had twice turned her out of doors. Some three or four months ago, when Mrs. Gum was changing her servant, she had consented to try this girl. Jabez Gum knew nothing of the arrangement until it was concluded, and disapproved of it. Altogether, it did not work satisfactorily: Miss Jones was careless, idle, and impudent; her step-mother was dissatisfied because she was not taken into the house; and Clerk Gum threatened every day, and his wife very often, to dismiss her.

It was only within a year or two that they had not kept an indoor servant; and the fact of their not doing so now puzzled the gossips of Calne. The clerk's emoluments were the same as ever; there was no Willy to encroach on them now; and the work of the house required a good servant. However, it pleased Mrs. Gum to have one in only by day; and who was to interfere with her if the clerk did not?

Jabez Gum worked on for some little time after eight o'clock, the breakfast-hour. He rather wondered he was not called to it, and registered a mental vow to discharge Miss Becky. Presently he went indoors, put his head into a small sitting-room on the left, and found the room empty, but the breakfast laid. The kitchen was behind it, and Jabez Gum stalked on down the passage, and went into it. On the other side of the passage was the best sitting-room, and a very small room at the back of it, which Jabez used as an office, and where he kept sundry account-books.

"Where's your missis?" asked he of the maid, who was on her knees toasting bread.

"Not down yet," was the short response.

"Not down yet!" repeated Jabez in surprise, for Mrs. Gum was generally down by seven. "You've got that door open again, Rebecca. How many more times am I to tell you I won't have it?"

"It's the smoke," said Rebecca. "This chimbley always smokes when it's first lighted."

"The chimney doesn't smoke, and you know that you are telling a falsehood. What do you want with it open? You'll have that wild man darting in upon you some morning. How will you like that?"

"I'm not afeard of him," was the answer, as Rebecca got up from her knees. "He couldn't eat me."

"But you know how timid your mistress is," returned the clerk, in a voice of extreme anger. "How dare you, girl, be insolent?"

He shut the door as he spoke—one that opened from the kitchen to the back garden—and bolted it. Washing his hands, and drying them with a round towel, he went upstairs, and found Mrs. Gum—as he had now and then found her of late—in a fit of prostration. She was a little woman, with a light complexion, and insipid, unmeaning face—some such a face as Willy's had been—and her hair, worn in neat bands under her cap, was the colour of tow.

"I couldn't help it, Gum," she began, as she stood before the glass, her trembling fingers trying to fasten her black alpaca gown—for she had never left off mourning for their son. "It's past eight, I know; but I've had such an upset this morning as never was, and I *couldn't* dress myself. I've had a shocking dream."

"Drat your dreams!" cried Mr. Gum, very much wanting his breakfast.

"Ah, Gum, don't! Those morning dreams, when they're vivid as this was, are not sent for ridicule. Pike was in it; and you know I can't *bear* him to be in my dreams. They are always bad when he is in them."

"If you wanted your breakfast as much as I want mine, you'd let Pike alone," retorted the clerk.

"I thought he was mixed up in some business with Lord Hartledon. I don't know what it was, but the dream was full of horror. It seemed that Lord Hartledon was dead or dying; whether he'd been killed or not, I can't say; but an awful dread was upon me of seeing him dead. A voice called out, 'Don't let him come to Calne!' and in the fright I awoke. I can't remember what part Pike played in the dream," she continued, "only the impression remained that he was in it."

"Perhaps he killed Lord Hartledon?" cried Gum, mockingly.

"No; not in the dream. Pike did not seem to be mixed up in it for ill. The ill was all on Lord Hartledon; but it was not Pike brought it upon him. Who it was, I couldn't see; but it was not Pike."

Clerk Gum looked down at his wife in scornful pity. He wondered sometimes, in his phlegmatic reasoning, why women were created such fools.

"Look here, Mrs. G. I thought those dreams of yours were pretty nearly dreamed out—there have been enough of 'em. How any woman, short of a born idiot, can stand there and confess herself so frightened by a dream as to be unable to get up and go about her duties, is beyond me."

"But, Gum, you don't let me finish. I woke up with the horror, I tell you—"

"What horror?" interrupted the clerk, angrily. "What did it consist of? I can't see the horror."

"Nor can I, very clearly," acknowledged Mrs. Gum; "but I know it was there. I woke up with the very words in my ears, 'Don't let him come to Calne!' and I started out of bed in terror for Lord Hartledon, lest he *should* come. We are only half awake, you know, at these moments. I pulled the curtain aside and looked out. Gum, if ever I thought to drop in my life, I thought it then. There was but one person to be seen in the road—and it was Lord Hartledon."

"Oh!" said Mr. Gum, cynically, after a moment of natural surprise. "Come out of his vault for a morning walk past your window, Mrs. G.!"

"Vault! I mean young Lord Hartledon, Gum."

Mr. Gum was a little taken back. They had been so much in the habit of calling the new Lord Hartledon, Lord Elster—who had not lived at Calne since he came into the title—that he had thought of the old lord when his wife was speaking.

"He was up there, just by the turning of the road, going on to Hartledon. Gum, I nearly dropped, I say. The next minute he was out of sight; then I rubbed my eyes and pinched my arms to make sure I was awake."

"And whether you saw a ghost, or whether you didn't," came the mocking retort.

"It was no ghost, Gum; it was Lord Hartledon himself."

"Nonsense! It was just as much one as the other. The fact is, you hadn't quite woke up out of that fine dream of yours, and you saw double. It was just as much young Hartledon as it was me."

"I never saw a ghost yet, and I don't fear I ever shall, Gum. I tell you it was Lord Hartledon. And if harm doesn't befall him at Calne, as shadowed forth in my dream, never believe me again."

"There, that's enough," peremptorily cried the clerk; knowing, if once Mrs. Gum took up any idea with a dream for its basis, how impossible it was to turn her. "Is the key of that kitchen door found yet?"

"No: it never will be, Gum. I've told you so before. My belief is, and always has been, that Rebecca let it drop by accident into the waste bucket."

"My belief is, that Rebecca made away with it for her own purposes," said the clerk. "I caught her just now with the door wide open. She's trying to make acquaintance with the man Pike; that's what she's at."

"Oh, Gum!"

"Yes; it's all very well to say 'Oh, Gum!' but if you were below-stairs looking after her, instead of dreaming up here, it might be better for everyone. Let me once be certain about it, and off she goes the next hour. A fine thing 'twould be some day for us to find her head smothered in the kitchen purgatory, and the silver spoons gone; as will be the case if any loose characters get in."

He was descending the stairs as he spoke the last sentence, delivered in loud tones, probably for the benefit of Miss Rebecca Jones. And lest the intelligent Protestant reader should fear he is being introduced to unorthodox regions, it may be as well to mention that the "purgatory" in Mr. Jabez Gum's kitchen consisted of an excavation, two feet square, under the hearth, covered with a grating through which the ashes and the small cinders fell; thereby enabling the economical housewife to throw the larger ones on the fire again. Such wells or "purgatories," as they are called, are common enough in the old-fashioned kitchens of certain English districts.

Mrs. Gum, ready now, had been about to follow her husband; but his suggestion—that the girl was watching an opportunity to make acquaintance with their undesirable neighbour, Pike—struck her motionless.

It seemed that she could never see this man without a shiver, or overcome the fright experienced when she first met him. It was on a dark autumn night. She was coming through the garden when she discerned, or thought she discerned, a light in the abandoned shed. Thinking of fire, she hastily crossed the stile that divided their garden from the waste land, and ran to it. There she was confronted by what she took to be a bear—but a bear that could talk; for he gruffly asked her who she was and

what she wanted. A black-haired, black-browed man, with a pipe between his teeth, and one sinewy arm bared to the elbow.

How Mrs. Gum tore away and tumbled over the stile in her terror, and got home again, she never knew. She supposed it to be a tramp, who had taken shelter there for the night; but finding to her dismay that the tramp stayed on, she had never overcome her fright from that hour to this.

Neither did her husband like the proximity of such a gentleman. They caused securer bolts to be put on their doors—for fastenings in small country places are not much thought about, people around being proverbially honest. They also had their shutters altered. The shutters to the windows, back and front, had holes in them in the form of a heart, such as you may have sometimes noticed. Before the wild-looking man—whose name came to be known as Pike—had been in possession of the shed a fortnight, Jabez Gum had the holes in his shutters filled-in and painted over. An additional security, said the neighbours: but poor timid Mrs. Gum could not overcome that first fright, and the very mention of the man set her trembling and quaking.

Nothing more was said of the dream or the apparition, real or fancied, of Lord Hartledon: Clerk Gum did not encourage the familiar handling of such topics in everyday life. He breakfasted, devoted an hour to his own business in the little office, and then put on his coat to go out. It was Friday morning. On that day and on Wednesdays the church was open for baptisms, and it was the clerk's custom to go over at ten o'clock and apprise the Rector of any notices he might have had.

Passing in at the iron gates, the large white house rose before him, beyond the wide lawn. It had been built by Dr. Ashton at his own expense. The old Rectory was a tumbledown, inconvenient place, always in dilapidation, for as soon as one part of it was repaired another fell through; and the Rector opened his heart and his purse, both large and generous, and built a new one. Mr. Gum was making his way unannounced to the Rector's study, according to custom, when a door on the opposite side of the hall opened, and Dr. Ashton came out. He was a pleasant-looking man, with dark hair and eyes, his countenance one of keen intellect; and though only of middle height, there was something stately, grand, imposing in his whole appearance.

"Is that you, Jabez?"

Connected with each other for so many years—a connection which had begun when both were young—the Rector and Mrs. Ashton had never called him anything but Jabez. With other people he was Gum, or Mr. Gum, or Clerk Gum: Jabez with them. He, Jabez, was the older man of the two by six or seven years, for the Rector was not more than forty-five. The clerk crossed the hall, its tessellated flags gleaming under the colours thrown in by the stained windows, and entered the drawing-room, a noble apartment looking on to the lawn in front. Mrs. Ashton, a tall, delicate-looking woman, with a gentle face, was standing before a painting just come home and hung up; to look at which the Rector and his wife had gone into the room.

It was the portrait of a sweet-looking girl with a sunny countenance. The features were of the delicate contour of Mrs. Ashton's; the rich brown hair, the soft brown eyes, and the intellectual expression of the face resembled the doctor's. Altogether, face and portrait were positively charming; one of those faces you must love at first sight, without waiting to question whether or not they are beautiful.

"Is it a good likeness, Jabez?" asked the Rector, whilst Mrs. Ashton made room for him with a smile of greeting.

"As like as two peas, sir," responded Jabez, when he had taken a long look. "What a face it is! Oftentimes it comes across my mind when I am not thinking of anything but business; and I'm always the better for it."

"Why, Jabez, this is the first time you have seen it."

"Ah, ma'am, you know I mean the original. There's two baptisms to-day, sir," he added, turning away; "two, and one churching. Mrs. Luttrell and her child, and the poor little baby whose mother died."

"Mrs. Luttrell!" repeated the Rector. "It's soon for her, is it not?"

"They want to go away to the seaside," replied the clerk. "What about that notice, sir?"

"I'll see to it before Sunday, Jabez. Any news?"

"No, sir; not that I've heard of. My wife wanted to persuade me she saw—"

At this moment a white-haired old serving-man entered the room with a note, claiming the Rector's attention. "The man's to take back the answer, sir, if you please."

"Wait then, Simon."

Old Simon stood aside, and the clerk, turning to Mrs. Ashton, continued his unfinished sentence.

"She wanted to persuade me she saw young Lord Hartledon pass at six o'clock this morning. A very likely tale that, ma'am."

"Perhaps she dreamt it, Jabez," said Mrs. Ashton, quietly.

Jabez chuckled; but what he would have answered was interrupted by the old servant.

"It's Mr. Elster that's come; not Lord Hartledon."

"Mr. Elster! How do you know, Simon?" asked Mrs. Ashton.

"The gardener mentioned it, ma'am, when he came in just now," was the servant's reply. "He said he saw Mr. Elster walk past this morning, as if he had just come by the luggage-train. I'm not sure but he spoke to him."

"The answer is 'No,' Simon," interposed the Rector, alluding to the note he had been reading. "But you can send word that I'll come in some time to-day."

"Charles, did you hear what Simon said—that Mr. Elster has come down?" asked Mrs. Ashton.

"Yes, I heard it," replied the doctor; and there was a hard dry tone in his voice, as if the news were not altogether palatable to him. "It must have been Percival Elster your wife saw, Jabez; not Lord Hartledon."

Jabez had been arriving at the same conclusion. "They used to be much alike in height and figure," he observed; "it was easy to mistake the one for the other. Then that's all this morning, sir?"

"There is nothing more, Jabez."

In a room whose large French window opened to flowerbeds on the side of the house, bending over a table on which sundry maps were spread, her face very close to them, sat at this moment a young lady. It was the same face you have just seen in the portrait—that of Dr. and Mrs. Ashton's only daughter. The wondrously sunny expression of countenance, blended with strange sweetness, was even more conspicuous than in the portrait. But what perhaps struck a beholder most, when looking at Miss Ashton for the first time, was a nameless grace and refinement that distinguished her whole appearance. She was of middle height, not more; slender; her head well set upon her shoulders. This was her own room; the schoolroom of her girlhood, the sitting-room she had been allowed to call her own since then. Books, work, music, a drawing-easel, and various other items, presenting a rather untidy collection, met the eye. This morning it was particularly untidy. The charts covered the table; one of them lay on the carpet; and a pot of mignonette had been overturned inside the open window scattering some of the mould. She was very busy; the open sleeves of her lilac-muslin dress were thrown back, and her delicate hands were putting the finishing touches in pencil to a plan she had been copying, from one of the maps. A few minutes more, and the pencil was thrown down in relief.

"I won't colour it this morning; it must be quite an hour and a half since I began; but the worst is done, and that's worth a king's ransom." In the escape from work, the innocent gaiety of her heart, she broke into a song, and began waltzing round the room. Barely had she passed the open window, her back turned to it, when a gentleman came up, looked in, stepped softly over the threshold, and imprisoned her by the waist.

"Be quiet, Arthur. Pick up that mignonette-pot you threw down, sir."

"My darling!" came in a low, heartfelt whisper. And Miss Ashton, with a faint cry, turned to see her engaged lover, Val Elster.

She stood before him, literally unable to speak in her great astonishment, the red roses going and coming in her delicate cheeks, the rich brown eyes, that might have been too brilliant but for their exceeding sweetness, raised questioningly to his. Mr. Elster folded her in his arms as if he would never release her again, and kissed the shrinking face repeatedly.

"Oh, Percival, Percival! Don't! Let me go."

He did so at last, and held her before him, her eyelids drooping now, to gaze at the face he loved so well—yes, loved fervently and well, in spite of his follies and sins. Her heart was beating wildly with its own rapture: for her the world had suddenly grown brighter.

"But when did you arrive?" she whispered, scarcely knowing how to utter the words in her excessive happiness.

He took her upon his arm and began to pace the room with her while he explained. There was an attempt at excuse for his prolonged absence—for Val Elster had returned from his duties in Vienna in May, and it was now August, and he had lingered through the intervening time in London, enjoying himself—but that was soon glossed over; and he told her how his brother was coming down on the morrow with a houseful of guests, and he, Val, had offered to go before them with the necessary instructions. He did not say *why* he had offered to do this; that his debts had become so pressing he was afraid to show himself longer in London. Such facts were not for the ear of that fair girl, who trusted him as the truest man she knew under heaven.

"What have you been doing, Anne?"

He pointed to the maps, and Miss Ashton laughed.

"Mrs. Graves was here yesterday; she is very clever, you know; and when something was being said about the course of ships out of England, I made some dreadful mistakes. She took me up sharply, and papa looked at me sharply—and the result is, I have to do a heap of maps. Please tell me if it's right, Percival?"

She held up her pencilled work of the morning. He was laughing.

"What mistakes did you make, Anne?"

"I am not sure but I said something about an Indiaman, leaving the London Docks, having to pass Scarborough," she returned demurely. "It was quite as bad."

"Do you remember, Anne, being punished for persisting, in spite of the slate on the wall and your nursery-governess, that the Mediterranean lay between Scotland and Ireland? Miss Jevons wanted to give you bread and water for three days. How's that prig Graves?" he added rather abruptly.

Anne Ashton laughed, blushing slightly. "He is just as you left him; very painstaking and efficient in the parish, and all that, but, oh, so stupid in some things! Is the map right?"

"Yes, it's right. I'll help you with the rest. If Dr. Ashton—"

"Why, Val! Is it you? I heard Lord Hartledon had come down."

Percival Elster turned. A lad of seventeen had come bounding in at the window. It was Dr. Ashton's eldest living son, Arthur. Anne was twenty-one. A son, who would have been nineteen now, had died; and there was another, John, two years younger than Arthur.

"How are you, Arthur, boy?" cried Val. "Edward hasn't come. Who told you he had?"

"Mother Gum. I have just met her."

"She told you wrong. He will be down to-morrow. Is that Dr. Ashton?"

Attracted perhaps by the voices, Dr. and Mrs. Ashton, who were then out on the lawn, came round to the window. Percival Elster grasped a hand of each, and after a minute or two's studied coldness, the doctor thawed. It was next to impossible to resist the genial manner, the winning attractions of the young man to his face. But Dr. Ashton could not approve of his line of conduct; and had sore doubts whether he had done right in allowing him to become the betrothed of his dearly-loved daughter.

CHAPTER IV. THE COUNTESS-DOWAGER

The guests had arrived, and Hartledon was alive with bustle and lights. The first link in the chain, whose fetters were to bind more than one victim, had been forged. Link upon link; a heavy, despairing burden no hand could lift; a burden which would have to be borne for the most part in dread secrecy and silence.

Mirrabable had exerted herself to good purpose, and Mirrabable was capable of it when occasion needed. Help had been procured from Calne, and on the Friday evening several of the Hartledon servants arrived from the town-house. "None but a young man would have put us to such a rout," quoth Mirrabable, in her privileged freedom; "my lord and lady would have sent a week's notice at least." But when Lord Hartledon arrived on the Saturday evening with his guests, Mirrabable was ready for them.

She stood at the entrance to receive them, in her black-silk gown and lace cap, its broad white-satin strings falling on either side the bunch of black ringlets that shaded her thin face. Who, to look at her quick, sharp countenance, with its practical sense, her active frame, her ready speech, her general capability, would believe her to be sister to that silly, dreaming Mrs. Gum? But it was so. Lord Hartledon, kind, affable, unaffected as ever was his brother Percival, shook hands with her heartily in the eyes of his guests before he said a word of welcome to them; and one of those guests, a remarkably broad woman, with a red face, a wide snub nose, and a front of light flaxen hair, who had stepped into the house leaning on her host's arm—having, in fact, taken it unasked, and seemed to be assuming a great deal of authority—turned round to stare at Mirrabable, and screwed her little light eyes together for a better view.

"Who is she, Hartledon?"

"Mrs. Mirrabable," answered his lordship rather shortly. "I think you must have seen her before. She has been Hartledon's mistress since my mother died," he rather pointedly added, for he saw incipient defiance in the old lady's countenance.

"Oh, Hartledon's head servant; the housekeeper, I presume," cried she, as majestically as her harsh voice allowed her to speak. "Perhaps you'll tell her who I am, Hartledon; and that I have undertaken to preside here for a little while."

"I believe Mrs. Mirrabable knows you, ma'am," spoke up Percival Elster, for Lord Hartledon had turned away, and was lost amongst his guests. "You have seen the Countess-Dowager of Kirton, Mirrabable?"

The countess-dowager faced round upon the speaker sharply.

"Oh, it's *you*, Val Elster? Who asked you to interfere? I'll see the rooms, Mirrabable, and the arrangements you have made. Maude, where are you? Come with me."

A tall, stately girl, with handsome features, raven hair and eyes, and a brilliant colour, extricated herself from the crowd. It was Lady Maude Kirton. Mirrabable went first; the countess-dowager followed, talking volubly; and Maude brought up the rear. Other servants came forward to see to the rest of the guests.

The most remarkable quality observable in the countess-dowager, apart from her great breadth, was her restlessness. She seemed never still for an instant; her legs had a fidgety, nervous movement in them, and in moments of excitement, which were not infrequent, she was given to executing a sort of war-dance. Old she was not; but her peculiar graces of person, her rotund form, her badly-made front of flaxen curls, which was rarely in its place, made her appear so. A bold, scheming, unscrupulous, vulgar-minded woman, who had never considered other people's feelings in her life, whether equals or inferiors. In her day she must have been rather tall—nearly as tall as that elegant

Maude who followed her; but her astounding width caused her now to appear short. She went looking into the different rooms as shown to her by Mirrable, and chose the best for herself and her daughter.

"Three en suite. Yes, that will be the thing, Mirrable. Lady Maude will take the inner one, I will occupy this, and my maid the outer. Very good. Now you may order the luggage up."

"But my lady," objected Mirrable, "these are the best rooms in the house; and each has a separate entrance, as you perceive. With so many guests to provide for, your maid cannot have one of these rooms."

"What?" cried the countess-dowager. "My maid not have one of these rooms? You insolent woman! Do you know that I am come here with my nephew, Lord Hartledon, to be mistress of this house, and of every one in it? You'd better mind *your* behaviour, for I can tell you that I shall look pretty sharply after it."

"Then," said Mirrable, who never allowed herself to be put out by any earthly thing, and rarely argued against the stream, "as your ladyship has come here as sole mistress, perhaps you will yourself apportion the rooms to the guests."

"Let them apportion them for themselves," cried the countess-dowager. "These three are mine; others manage as they can. It's Hartledon's fault. I told him not to invite a heap of people. You and I shall get on together very well, I've no doubt, Mirrable," she continued in a false, fawning voice; for she was remarkably alive at all times to her own interests. "Am I to understand that you are the housekeeper?"

"I am acting as housekeeper at present," was Mirrable's answer. "When my lord went to town, after my lady's death, the housekeeper went also, and has remained there. I have taken her place. Lord Elster—Lord Hartledon, I mean—has not lived yet at Hartledon, and we have had no establishment."

"Then who are you?"

"I was maid to Lady Hartledon for many years. Her ladyship treated me more as a friend at the last; and the young gentlemen always did so."

"Very good," cried the untrue voice. "And, now, Mirrable, you can go down and send up some tea for myself and Lady Maude. What time do we dine?"

"Mr. Elster ordered it for eight o'clock."

"And what business had *he* to take orders upon himself?" and the pale little eyes flashed with anger. "Who's Val Elster, that he should interfere? I sent word by the servants that we wouldn't dine till nine."

"Mr. Elster is in his own house, madam; and—"

"In his own house!" raved Lady Kirton. "It's no house of his; it's his brother's. And I wish I was his brother for a day only; I'd let Mr. Val know what presumption comes to. Can't dinner be delayed?"

"I'm afraid not, my lady."

"Ugh!" snapped the countess-dowager. "Send up tea at once; and let it be strong, with a great deal of green in it. And some rolled bread-and-butter, and a little well-buttered toast."

Mirrable departed with the commands, more inclined to laugh at the selfish old woman than to be angry. She remembered the countess-dowager arriving on an unexpected visit some three or four years before, and finding the old Lord Hartledon away and his wife ill in bed. She remained three days, completely upsetting the house; so completely upsetting the invalid Lady Hartledon, that the latter was glad to lend her a sum of money to get rid of her.

Truth to say, Lady Kirton had never been a welcome guest at Hartledon; had been shunned, in fact, and kept away by all sorts of *ruses*. The only other visit she had paid the family, in Mirrable's remembrance, was to the town-house, when the children were young. Poor little Val had been taught by his nurse to look upon her as a "bogey;" went about in terror of her; and her ladyship detecting the feeling, administered sly pinches whenever they met. Perhaps neither of them had completely overcome the antagonism from that time to this.

A scrambling sort of life had been Lady Kirton's. The wife of a very poor and improvident Irish peer, who had died early, leaving her badly provided for, her days had been one long scramble to make both ends meet and avoid creditors. Now in Ireland, now on the Continent, now coming out for a few brief weeks of fashionable life, and now on the wing to some place of safety, had she dodged about, and become utterly unscrupulous.

There was a whole troop of children, who had been allowed to go to the good or the bad very much in their own way, with little help or hindrance from their mother. All the daughters were married now, excepting Maude, mostly to German barons and French counts. One had espoused a marquis—native country not clearly indicated; one an Italian duke: but the marquis lived somewhere over in Algeria in a small lodging, and the Duke condescended to sing an occasional song on the Italian stage.

It was all one to Lady Kirton. They had taken their own way, and she washed her hands of them as easily as though they had never belonged to her. Had they been able to supply her with an occasional bank-note, or welcome her on a protracted visit, they had been her well-beloved and most estimable daughters.

Of the younger sons, all were dispersed; the dowager neither knew nor cared where. Now and again a piteous begging-letter would come from one or the other, which she railed at and scolded over, and bade Maude answer. Her eldest son, Lord Kirton, had married some four or five years ago, and since then the countess-dowager's lines had been harder than ever. Before that event she could go to the place in Ireland whenever she liked (circumstances permitting), and stay as long as she liked; but that was over now. For the young Lady Kirton, who on her own score spent all the money her husband could scrape together, and more, had taken an inveterate dislike to her mother-in-law, and would not tolerate her.

Never, since she was thus thrown upon her own resources, had the countess-dowager's lucky star been in the ascendant as it had been this season, for she contrived to fasten herself upon the young Lord Hartledon, and secure a firm footing in his town-house. She called him her nephew—"My nephew Hartledon;" but that was a little improvement upon the actual relationship, for she and the late Lady Hartledon had been cousins only. She invited herself for a week's sojourn in May, and had never gone away again; and it was now August. She had come down with him, *sans cérémonie*, to Hartledon; had told him (as a great favour) that she would look after his house and guests during her stay, as his mother would have done. Easy, careless, good-natured Hartledon acquiesced, and took it all as a matter of course. To him she was ever all sweetness and suavity.

None knew better on which side her bread was buttered than the countess-dowager. She liked it buttered on both sides, and generally contrived to get it.

She had come down to Hartledon House with one fixed determination—that she did not quit it until the Lady Maude was its mistress. For a long while Maude had been her sole hope. Her other daughters had married according to their fancy—and what had come of it?—but Maude was different. Maude had great beauty; and Maude, truth to say, was almost as selfishly alive to her own interest as her mother. *She* should marry well, and so be in a position to shelter the poor, homeless, wandering dowager. Had she chosen from the whole batch of peers, not one could have been found more eligible than he whom fortune seemed to have turned up for her purpose—Lord Hartledon; and before the countess-dowager had been one week his guest in London she began her scheming.

Lady Maude was nothing loth. Young, beautiful, vain, selfish, she yet possessed a woman's susceptible heart; though surrounded with luxury, dress, pomp, show, which are said to deaden the feelings, and in some measure do deaden them, Lady Maude insensibly managed to fall in love, as deeply as ever did an obscure damsel of romance. She had first met him two years before, when he was Viscount Elster; had liked him then. Their relationship sanctioned their being now much together, and the Lady Maude lost her heart to him.

Would it bring forth fruit, this scheming of the countess-dowager's, and Maude's own love? In her wildest hopes the old woman never dreamed of what that fruit would be; or, unscrupulous as

she was by habit, unfeeling by nature, she might have carried away Maude from Hartledon within the hour of their arrival.

Of the three parties more immediately concerned, the only innocent one—innocent of any intentions—was Lord Hartledon. He liked Maude very well as a cousin, but otherwise he did not care for her. They might succeed—at least, had circumstances gone on well, they might have succeeded—in winning him at last; but it would not have been from love. His present feeling towards Maude was one of indifference; and of marriage at all he had not begun to think.

Val Elster, on the contrary, regarded Maude with warm admiration. Her beauty had charms for him, and he had been oftener at her side but for the watchful countess-dowager. It would have been horrible had Maude fallen in love with the wrong brother, and the old lady grew to hate him for the fear, as well as on her own score. The feeling of dislike, begun in Val's childhood, had ripened in the last month or two to almost open warfare. He was always in the way. Many a time when Lord Hartledon might have enjoyed a *tête-à-tête* with Maude, Val Elster was there to spoil it.

But the culminating point had arrived one day, when Val, half laughingly, half seriously, told the dowager, who had been provoking him almost beyond endurance, that she might spare her angling in regard to Maude, for Hartledon would never bite. But that he took his pleasant face beyond her reach, it might have suffered, for her fingers were held out alarmingly.

From that time she took another little scheme into her hands—that of getting Percival Elster out of his brother's favour and his brother's house. Val, on his part, seriously advised his brother *not* to allow the Kirtons to come to Hartledon; and this reached the ears of the dowager. You may be sure it did not tend to soothe her. Lord Hartledon only laughed at Val, saying they might come if they liked; what did it matter?

But, strange to say, Val Elster was as a very reed in the hands of the old woman. Let her once get hold of him, and she could turn him any way she pleased. He felt afraid of her, and bent to her will. The feeling may have had its rise partly in the fear instilled into his boyhood, partly in the yielding nature of his disposition. However that might be, it was a fact; and Val could no more have openly opposed the resolute, sharp-tongued old woman to her face than he could have changed his nature. He rarely called her anything but "ma'am," as their nurse had taught him and his brothers and sisters to do in those long-past years.

Before eight o'clock the guests had all assembled in the drawing-room, except the countess-dowager and Maude. Lord Hartledon was going about amongst them, talking to one and another of the beauties of this, his late father's place; scarcely yet thought of as his own. He was a tall slender man; in figure very much resembling Percival, but not in face: the one was dark, the other fair. There was also the same indolent sort of movement, a certain languid air discernible in both; proclaiming the undoubted fact, that both were idle in disposition and given to ennui. There the resemblance ended. Lord Hartledon had nothing of the irresolution of Percival Elster, but was sufficiently decisive in character, prompt in action.

A noble room, this they were in, as many of the rooms were in the fine old mansion. Lord Hartledon opened the inner door, and took them into another, to show them the portrait of his brother George—a fine young man also, with a fair, pleasing countenance.

"He is like Elster; not like you, Hartledon," cried a young man, whose name was Carteret.

"*Was*, you mean, Carteret," corrected Lord Hartledon, in tones of sad regret. "There was a great family resemblance between us all, I believe."

"He died from an accident, did he not?" said Mr. O'Moore, an Irishman, who liked to be called "The O'Moore."

"Yes."

Percival Elster turned to his brother, and spoke in low tones. "Edward, was any particular person suspected of having fired the shot?"

"None. A set of loose, lawless characters were out that night, and—"

"What are you all looking at here?"

The interruption came from Lady Kirton, who was sailing into the room with Maude. A striking contrast the one presented to the other. Maude in pink silk and a pink wreath, her haughty face raised in pride, her dark eyes flashing, radiantly beautiful. The old dowager, broad as she was high, her face rouged, her short snub nose always carried in the air, her light eyes unmeaning, her flaxen eyebrows heavy, her flaxen curls crowned by a pea-green turban. Her choice attire was generally composed, as to-day, of some cheap, flimsy, gauzy material bright in colour. This evening it was orange lace, all flounces and frills, with a lace scarf; and she generally had innumerable ends of quilted net flying about her skirts, not unlike tails. It was certain she did not spend much money upon her own attire; and how she procured the costly dresses for Maude the latter appeared in was ever a mystery. You can hardly fancy the bedecked old figure that she made. The O'Moore nearly laughed out, as he civilly turned to answer her question.

"We were looking at this portrait, Lady Kirton."

"And saying how much he was like Val," put in young Carteret, between whom and the dowager warfare also existed. "Val, which was the elder?"

"George was."

"Then his death made you heir-presumptive," cried the thoughtless young man, speaking impulsively.

"Heir-presumptive to what?" asked the dowager snapping at the words.

"To Hartledon."

"*He* heir to Hartledon! Don't trouble yourself, young man, to imagine that Val Elster's ever likely to come into Hartledon. Do you want to shoot his lordship, as *he* was shot?"

The uncalled-for retort, the strangely intemperate tones, the quick passionate fling of the hand towards the portrait astonished young Carteret not a little. Others were surprised also; and not one present but stared at the speaker. But she said no more. The pea-green turban and flaxen curls were nodding ominously; and that was all.

The animus to Val Elster was very marked. Lord Hartledon glanced at his brother with a smile, and led the way back to the other drawing-room. At that moment the butler announced dinner; the party filed across the hall to the fine old dining-room, and began finding their seats.

"I shall sit there, Val. You can take a chair at the side."

Val did look surprised at this. He was about to take the foot of his brother's table, as usual; and there was the pea-green turban standing over him, waiting to usurp it. It would have been quite beyond Val Elster, in his sensitiveness, to tell her she should not have it; but he did feel annoyed. He was sweet-tempered, however. Moreover, he was a gentleman, and only waited to make one remark.

"I fear you will not like this place, ma'am. Won't it look odd to see a lady at the bottom of the table?"

"I have promised my dear nephew to act as mistress, and to see after his guests; and I don't choose to sit at the side under those circumstances." But she had looked at Lord Hartledon, and hesitated before she spoke. Perhaps she thought his lordship would resign the head of the table to her, and take the foot himself. If so, she was mistaken.

"You will be more comfortable at the side, Lady Kirton," cried Lord Hartledon, when he discovered what the bustle was about.

"Not at all, Hartledon; not at all."

"But I like my brother to face me, ma'am. It is his accustomed place."

Remonstrance was useless. The dowager nodded her pea-green turban, and firmly seated herself. Val Elster dexterously found a seat next Lady Maude; and a gay gleam of triumph shot out of his deep-blue eyes as he glanced at the dowager. It was not the seat she would have wished him to take; but to interfere again might have imperilled her own place. Maude laughed. She did not care

for Val—rather despised him in her heart; but he was the most attractive man present, and she liked admiration.

Another link in the chain! For how many, many days and years, dating from that evening, did that awful old woman take a seat, at intervals, at Lord Hartledon's table, and assume it as a right!

CHAPTER V. JEALOUSY

The rain poured down on the Monday morning; and Lord Hartledon stood at the window of the countess-dowager's sitting-room—one she had unceremoniously adopted for her own private use—smoking a cigar, and watching the clouds. Any cigar but his would have been consigned to the other side the door. Mr. Elster had only shown (by mere accident) the end of his cigar-case, and the dowager immediately demanded what he meant by displaying that article in the presence of ladies. A few minutes afterwards Lord Hartledon entered, smoking, and was allowed to enjoy his cigar with impunity. Good-tempered Val's delicate lips broke into a silent smile as he marked the contrast.

He lounged on the sofa, doing nothing, in his idle fashion; Lord Hartledon continued to watch the clouds. On the previous Saturday night the gentlemen had entered into an argument about boating: the result was that a match on the river was arranged, and some bets were pending on it. It had been fixed to come off this day, Monday; but if the rain continued to come down, it must be postponed; for the ladies, who had been promised the treat, would not venture out to see it.

"It has come on purpose," grumbled Lord Hartledon. "Yesterday was as fine and bright as it could be, the glass standing at set fair; and now, just because this boating was to come off, the rain peppers down!"

The rain excepted, it was a fair vision that he looked out upon. The room faced the back of the house, and beyond the lovely grounds green slopes extended to the river, tolerably wide here, winding peacefully in its course. The distant landscape was almost like a scene from fairyland.

The restless dowager—in a nondescript head-dress this morning, adorned with an upright tuft of red feathers and voluminous skirts of brown net, a jacket and flounces to match—betook herself to the side of Lord Hartledon.

"Where d'you get the boats?" she asked.

"They are kept lower down, at the boat-house," he replied, puffing at his cigar. "You can't see it from here; it's beyond Dr. Ashton's; lots of 'em; any number to be had for the hiring. Talking of Dr. Ashton, they will dine here to-day, ma'am."

"Who will?" asked Lady Kirton.

"The doctor, Mrs. Ashton—if she's well enough—and Miss Ashton."

"Who are they, my dear nephew?"

"Why, don't you know? Dr. Ashton preached to you yesterday. He is Rector of Calne; you must have heard of Dr. Ashton. They will be calling this morning, I expect."

"And you have invited them to dinner! Well, one must do the civil to this sort of people."

Lord Hartledon burst into a laugh. "You won't say 'this sort of people' when you see the Ashtons, Lady Kirton. They are quite as good as we are. Dr. Ashton has refused a bishopric, and Anne is the sweetest girl ever created."

Lady Maude, who was drawing, and exchanging a desultory sentence once in a way with Val, suddenly looked up. Her colour had heightened, though it was brilliant at all times.

"Are you speaking of my maid?" she said—and it might be that she had not attended to the conversation, and asked in ignorance, not in scorn. "Her name is Anne."

"I was speaking of Anne Ashton," said Lord Hartledon.

"Allow me to beg Anne Ashton's pardon," returned Lady Maude; her tone this time unmistakably mocking. "Anne is so common a name amongst servants."

"I don't care whether it is common amongst servants or uncommon," spoke Lord Hartledon rather hotly, as though he would resent the covert sneer. "It is Anne Ashton's; and I love the name for her sake. But I think it a pretty name; and should, if she did not bear it; prettier than yours, Maude."

"And pray who *is* Anne Ashton?" demanded the countess-dowager, with as much hauteur as so queer an old figure and face could put on, whilst Maude bent over her employment with white lips.

"She is Dr. Ashton's daughter," spoke Lord Hartledon, shortly. "My father valued him above all men. He loved Anne too—loved her dearly; and—though I don't know whether it is quite fair to Anne to let this out—the probable future connection between the families was most welcome to him. Next to my father, we boys revered the doctor; he was our tutor, in a measure, when we were staying at Hartledon; at least, tutor to poor George and Val; they used to read with him."

"And you would hint at some alliance between you and this Anne Ashton!" cried the countess-dowager, in a fume; for she thought she saw a fear that the great prize might slip through her fingers. "What sort of an alliance, I should like to ask? Be careful what you say, Hartledon; you may injure the young woman."

"I'll take care I don't injure Anne Ashton," returned Lord Hartledon, enjoying her temper. "As to an alliance with her—my earnest wish is, as it was my father's, that time may bring it about. Val there knows I wish it."

Val glanced at his brother by way of answer. He had taken no part in the discussion; his slight lips were drawn down, as he balanced a pair of scissors on his forefinger, and he looked less good-tempered than usual.

"Has she red hair and sky-blue eyes, and a doll's face? Does she sit in the pew under the reading-desk with three other dolls?" asked the foaming dowager.

Lord Hartledon turned and stared at the speaker in wonder—what could be so exciting her?

"She has soft brown hair and eyes, and a sweet gentle face; she is a graceful, elegant, attractive girl," said he, curtly. "She sat alone yesterday; for Arthur was in another part of the church, and Mrs. Ashton was not there. Mrs. Ashton is not in good health, she tells me, and cannot always come. The Rector's pew is the one with green curtains."

"Oh, *that* vulgar-looking girl!" exclaimed Maude, her unjust words—and she knew them to be unjust—trembling on her lips. "The Grand Sultan might exalt her to be his chief wife, but he could never make a lady of her, or get her to look like one."

"Be quiet, Maude," cried the countess-dowager, who, with all her own mistakes, had the sense to see that this sort of disparagement would only recoil upon them with interest, and who did not like the expression of Lord Hartledon's face. "You talk as if you had seen this Mrs. Ashton, Hartledon, since your return."

"I should not be many hours at Hartledon without seeing Mrs. Ashton," he answered. "That's where I was yesterday afternoon, ma'am, when you were so kindly anxious in your inquiries as to what had become of me. I dare say I was absent an unconscionable time. I never know how it passes, once I am with Anne."

"We represent Love as blind, you know," spoke Maude, in her desperation, unable to steady her pallid lips. "You apparently do not see it, Lord Hartledon, but the young woman is the very essence of vulgarity."

A pause followed the speech. The countess-dowager turned towards her daughter in a blazing rage, and Val Elster quitted the room.

"Maude," said Lord Hartledon, "I am sorry to tell you that you have put your foot in it."

"Thank you," panted Lady Maude, in her agitation. "For giving my opinion of your Anne Ashton?"

"Precisely. You have driven Val away in suppressed indignation."

"Is Val of the Anne Ashton faction, that the truth should tell upon him, as well as upon you?" she returned, striving to maintain an assumption of sarcastic coldness.

"It is upon him that the words will tell. Anne is engaged to him."

"Is it true? Is Val really engaged to her?" cried the countess-dowager in an ecstasy of relief, lifting her snub nose and painted cheeks, whilst a glad light came into Maude's eyes again. "I did hear he was engaged to some girl; but such reports of younger sons go for nothing."

"Val was engaged to her before he went abroad. Whether he will get her or not, is another thing."

"To hear you talk, Hartledon, one might have supposed you cared for the girl yourself," cried Lady Kirton; but her brow was smooth again, and her tone soft as honey. "You should be more cautious."

"Cautious! Why so? I love and respect Anne beyond any girl on earth. But that Val hastened to make hay when the sun shone, whilst I fell asleep under the hedge, I don't know but I might have proposed to her myself," he added, with a laugh. "However, it shall not be my fault if Val does not win her."

The countess-dowager said no more. She was worldly-wise in her way, and thought it best to leave well alone. Sailing out of the room she left them alone together: as she was fond of doing.

"Is it not rather—rather beneath an Elster to marry an obscure country clergyman's daughter?" began Lady Maude, a strange bitterness filling her heart.

"I tell you, Maude, the Ashtons are our equals in all ways. He is a proud old doctor of divinity—not old, however—of irreproachable family and large private fortune."

"You spoke of him as a tutor?"

"A tutor! Oh, I said he was in a measure our tutor when we were young. I meant in training us—in training us to good; and he allowed George and Val to read with him, and directed their studies: all for love, and out of the friendship he and my father bore each other. Dr. Ashton a paid tutor!" ejaculated Lord Hartledon, laughing at the notion. "Dr. Ashton an obscure country clergyman! And even if he were, who is Val, that he should set himself up?"

"He is the Honourable Val Elster."

"Very honourable! Val is an unlucky dog of a spendthrift; that's what Val is. See how many times he has been set up on his legs!—and has always come down again. He had that place in the Government my father got him. He was attaché in Paris; subsequently in Vienna; he has had ever so many chances, and drops through all. One can't help loving Val; he is an attractive, sweet-tempered, good-natured fellow; but he was certainly born under an unlucky star. Elster's folly!"

"Val will drop through more chances yet," remarked Lady Maude. "I pity Miss Ashton, if she means to wait for him."

"Means to! She loves him passionately—devotedly. She would wait for him all her life, and think it happiness only to see him once in a way."

"As an astronomer looks at a star through a telescope," laughed Maude; "and Val is not worth the devotion."

"Val is not a bad fellow in the main; quite the contrary, Maude. Of course we all know his besetting sin—irresolution. A child might sway him, either for good or ill. The very best thing that could happen to Val would be his marriage with Anne. She is sensible and judicious; and I think Val could not fail to keep straight under her influence. If Dr. Ashton could only be brought to see the matter in this light!"

"Can he not?"

"He thinks—and I don't say he has not reason—that Val should show some proof of stability before his marriage, instead of waiting until after it. The doctor has not gone to the extent of parting them, or of suspending the engagement; but he is prepared to be strict and exacting as to Mr. Val's line of conduct; and I fancy the suspicion that it would be so has kept Val away from Calne."

"What will be done?"

"I hardly know. Val does not make a confidant of me, and I can't get to the bottom of how he is situated. Debts I am sure he has; but whether—"

"Val always had plenty of those," interrupted Maude.

"True. When my father died, three parts of Val's inheritance went to pay off debts nobody knew he had contracted. The worst is, he glides into these difficulties unwittingly, led and swayed by others. We don't say Elster's sin, or Elster's crimes; we say Elster's folly. I don't believe Val ever in his life did a bad thing of deliberate intention. Designing people get hold of him—fast fellows who are going headlong down-hill themselves—and Val, unable to say 'No,' is drawn here and drawn there, and tumbles with them into a quagmire, and perhaps has to pay his friends' costs, as well as his own, before he can get out of it. Do you believe in luck, Maude?"

"In luck?" answered Maude, raising her eyes at the abrupt question. "I don't know."

"I believe in it. I believe that some are born under a lucky star, and others under an unlucky one. Val is one of the latter. He is always unlucky. Set him up, and down he comes again. I don't think I ever knew Val lucky in my life. Look at his nearly blowing his arm off that time in Scotland! You will laugh at me, I dare say; but a thought crosses me at odd moments that his ill-luck will prevail still, in the matter of Miss Ashton. Not if I can help it, however; I'll do my best, for Anne's sake."

"You seem to think very much of her yourself," cried Lady Maude, her cheeks crimsoning with an angry flush.

"I do—as Val's future wife. I love Anne Ashton better than any one else in the world. We all loved her. So would you if you knew her. In my mother's last illness Anne was a greater comfort to her than Laura."

"Should you ever think of a wife on your own score, she may not like this warm praise of Miss Anne Ashton," said Lady Maude, assiduously drawing, her hot face bent down to within an inch of the cardboard.

"Not like it? She wouldn't be such an idiot, I hope, as to dislike it. Is not Anne going to be my brother's wife? Did you suppose I spoke of Anne in that way?—you must have been dreaming, Maude."

Maude hoped she had been. The young man took his cigar from his mouth, ran a penknife through the end, and began smoking again.

"That time is far enough off, Maude. I am not going to tie myself up with a wife, or to think of one either, for many a long year to come."

Her heart beat with a painful throbbing. "Why not?"

"No danger. My wild oats are not sown yet, any more than Val's; only you don't hear of them, because I have money to back me, and he has not. I must find a girl I should like to make my wife before that event comes off, Maude; and I have not found her yet."

Lady Maude damaged her landscape. She sketched in a tree where a chimney ought to have been, and laid the fault upon her pencil.

"It has been real sport, Maude, ever since I came home from knocking about abroad, to hear and see the old ladies. They think I am to be caught with a bait; and that bait is each one's own enchanting daughter. Let them angle, an they please—it does no harm. They are amused, and I am none the worse. I enjoy a laugh sometimes, while I take care of myself; as I have need to do, or I might find myself the victim of some detestable breach-of-promise affair, and have to stand damages. But for Anne Ashton, Val would have had his head in that Westminster-noose a score of times; and the wonder is that he has kept out of it. No, thank you, my ladies; I am not a marrying man."

"Why do you tell me this?" asked Lady Maude, a sick faintness stealing over her face and heart.

"You are one of ourselves, and I tell you anything. It will be fun for you, Maude, if you'll open your eyes and look on. There are some in the house now who—" He stopped and laughed.

"I would rather not hear this!" she cried passionately. "Don't tell me."

Lord Hartledon looked at her, begged her pardon, and quitted the room with his cigar. Lady Maude, black as night, dashed her pencil on to the cardboard, and scored her sketch all over with ugly black lines. Her face itself looked ugly then.

"Why did he say this to me?" she asked of her fevered heart. "Was it said with a purpose? Has he found out that I *love* him? that my shallow old mother is one of the subtlest of the anglers? and that—"

"What on earth are you at with your drawing, Maude?"

"Oh, I have grown sick of the sketch. I am not in a drawing mood to-day, mamma."

"And how fierce you were looking," pursued the countess-dowager, who had darted in at rather an inopportune moment for Maude—darting in on people at such moments being her habit. "And that was the sketch Hartledon asked you to do for him from the old painting!"

"He may do it himself, if he wants it done."

"Where is Hartledon?"

"I don't know. Gone out somewhere."

"Has he offended you, or vexed you?"

"Well, he did vex me. He has just been assuring me with the coolest air that he should never marry; or, at least, not for years and years to come. He told me to notice what a heap of girls were after him—or their mothers for them—and the fun he had over it, not being a marrying man."

"Is that all? You need not have put yourself in a fatigue, and spoilt your drawing. Lord Hartledon shall be your husband before six months are over—or reproach me ever afterwards with being a false prophetess and a bungling manager."

Maude's brow cleared. She had almost childlike confidence in the tact of her unscrupulous mother.

But how the morning's conversation altogether rankled in her heart, none save herself could tell: ay, and in that of the dowager. Although Anne Ashton was the betrothed of Percival Elster, and Lord Hartledon's freely-avowed love for her was evidently that of a brother, and he had said he should do all he could to promote the marriage, the strongest jealousy had taken possession of Lady Maude's heart. She already hated Anne Ashton with a fierce and bitter hatred. She turned sick with envy when, in the morning visit that was that day paid by the Ashtons, she saw that Anne was really what Lord Hartledon had described her—one of the sweetest, most lovable, most charming of girls; almost without her equal in the world for grace and goodness and beauty. She turned more sick with envy when, at dinner afterwards, to which the Ashtons came, Lord Hartledon devoted himself to them, almost to the neglect of his other guests, lingering much with Anne.

The countess-dowager marked it also, and was furious. Nothing could be urged against them; they were unexceptionable. The doctor, a chatty, straightforward, energetic man, of great intellect and learning, and emphatically a gentleman; his wife attracting by her unobtrusive gentleness; his daughter by her grace and modest self-possession. Whatever Maude Kirton might do, she could never, for very shame, again attempt to disparage them. Surely there was no just reason for the hatred which took possession of Maude's heart; a hatred that could never be plucked out again.

But Maude knew how to dissemble. It pleased her to affect a sudden and violent friendship for Anne.

"Hartledon told me how much I should like you," she whispered, as they sat together on the sofa after dinner, to which Maude had drawn her. "He said I should find you the dearest girl I ever met; and I do so. May I call you 'Anne'?"

Not for a moment did Miss Ashton answer. Truth to say, far from reciprocating the sudden fancy boasted of by Maude, she had taken an unaccountable dislike to her. Something of falsity in the tone, of sudden *hardiesse* in the handsome black eyes, acted upon Anne as an instinctive warning.

"As you please, Lady Maude."

"Thank you so much. Hartledon whispered to me the secret about you and Val—Percival, I mean. Shall you accomplish the task, think you?"

"What task?"

"That of turning him from his evil ways."

"His evil ways?" repeated Anne, in a surprised indignation she did not care to check. "I do not understand you, Lady Maude."

"Pardon me, my dear Anne: it was hazardous so to speak *to you*. I ought to have said his thoughtless ways. Quant à moi, je ne vois pas la différence. Do you understand French?"

Miss Ashton looked at her, really not knowing what this style of conversation might mean. Maude continued; she had a habit of putting forth a sting on occasion, or what she hoped might be a sting.

"You are staring at the superfluous question. Of course it is one in these *French* days, when everyone speaks it. What was I saying? Oh, about Percival. Should he ever have the luck to marry, meaning the income, he will make a docile husband; but his wife will have to keep him under her finger and thumb; she must be master as well as mistress, for his own sake."

"I think Mr. Elster would not care to be so spoken of," said Miss Ashton, her face beginning to glow.

"You devoted girl! It is you who don't care to hear it. Take care, Anne; too much love is not good for gaining the mastership; and I have heard that you are—shall I say it?—*éperdue*."

Anne, in spite of her calm good sense, was actually provoked to a retort in kind, and felt terribly vexed with herself for it afterwards. "A rumour of the same sort has been breathed as to the Lady Maude Kirton's regard for Lord Hartledon."

"Has it?" returned Lady Maude, with a cool tone and a glowing face. "You are angry with me without reason. Have I not offered to swear to you an eternal friendship?"

Anne shook her head, and her lips parted with a curious expression. "I do not swear so lightly, Lady Maude."

"What if I were to avow to you that it is true?—that I do love Lord Hartledon, deeply as it is known you love his brother," she added, dropping her voice—"would you believe me?"

Anne looked at the speaker's face, but could read nothing. Was she in jest or earnest?

"No, I would not believe you," she said, with a smile. "If you did love him, you would not proclaim it."

"Exactly. I was jesting. What is Lord Hartledon to me?—save that we are cousins, and passably good friends. I must avow one thing, that I like him better than I do his brother."

"For that no avowal is necessary," said Anne; "the fact is sufficiently evident."

"You are right, Anne;" and for once Maude spoke earnestly. "I do *not* like Percival Elster. But I will always be civil to him for your sweet sake."

"Why do you dislike him?—if I may ask it. Have you any particular reason for doing so?"

"I have no reason in the world. He is a good-natured, gentlemanly fellow; and I know no ill of him, except that he is always getting into scrapes, and dropping, as I hear, a lot of money. But if he got out of his last guinea, and went almost in rags, it would be nothing to me; so *that's* not it. One does take antipathies; I dare say you do, Miss Ashton. What a blessing Hartledon did not die in that fever he caught last year! Val would have inherited. What a mercy!"

"That he lived? or that Val is not Lord Hartledon?"

"Both. But I believe I meant that Val is not reigning."

"You think he would not have made a worthy inheritor?"

"A worthy inheritor? Oh, I was not glancing at that phase of the question. Here he comes! I will give up my seat to him."

It is possible Lady Maude expected some pretty phrases of affection; begging her to keep it. If so, she was mistaken. Anne Ashton was one of those essentially quiet, self-possessed girls in society, whose manners seem almost to border on apathy. She did not say "Do go," or "Don't go." She was perfectly passive; and Maude moved away half ashamed of herself, and feeling, in spite of her jealousy and her prejudice, that if ever there was a ladylike girl upon earth, it was Anne Ashton.

"How do you like her, Anne?" asked Val Elster, dropping into the vacant place.

"Not much."

"Don't you? She is very handsome."

"Very handsome indeed. Quite beautiful. But still I don't like her."

"You would like her if you knew her. She has a rare spirit, only the old dowager keeps it down."

"I don't think she much likes you, Val."

"She is welcome to dislike me," returned Val Elster.

CHAPTER VI. AT THE BRIDGE

The famous boat-race was postponed. Some of the competitors had discovered they should be the better for a few days' training, and the contest was fixed for the following Monday.

Not a day of the intervening week but sundry small cockle-shells—things the ladies had already begun to designate as the "wager-boats," each containing a gentleman occupant, exercising his arms on a pair of sculls—might be seen any hour passing and repassing on the water; and the green slopes of Hartledon, which here formed the bank of the river, grew to be tenanted with fair occupants. Of course they had their favourites, these ladies, and their little bets of gloves on them.

As the day for the contest drew near the interest became really exciting; and on the Saturday morning there was quite a crowd on the banks. The whole week, since Monday, had been most beautiful—calm, warm, lovely. Percival Elster, in his rather idle fashion, was not going to join in the contest: there were enough without him, he said.

He was standing now, talking to Anne. His face wore a sad expression, as she glanced up at him from beneath the white feather of her rather large-brimmed straw hat. Anne had been a great deal at Hartledon that week, and was as interested in the race as any of them, wearing Lord Hartledon's colours.

"How did you hear it, Anne?" he was asking.

"Mamma told me. She came into my room just now, and said there had been words."

"Well, it's true. The doctor took me to task exactly as he used to do when I was a boy. He said my course of life was sinful; and I rather fired up at that. Idle and useless it may be, but sinful it is not: and I said so. He explained that he meant that, and persisted in his assertion—that an idle, aimless, profitless life was a sinful one. Do you know the rest?"

"No," she faltered.

"He said he would give me to the end of the year. And if I were then still pursuing my present frivolous course of life, doing no good to myself or to anyone else, he should cancel the engagement. My darling, I see how this pains you."

She was suppressing her tears with difficulty. "Papa will be sure to keep his word, Percival. He is so resolute when he thinks he is right."

"The worst is, it's true. I do fall into all sorts of scrapes, and I have got out of money, and I do idle my time away," acknowledged the young man in his candour. "And all the while, Anne, I am thinking and hoping to do right. If ever I get set on my legs again, *won't* I keep on them!"

"But how many times have you said so before!" she whispered.

"Half the follies for which I am now paying were committed when I was but a boy," he said. "One of the men now visiting here, Dawkes, persuaded me to put my name to a bill for him for fifteen hundred pounds, and I had to pay it. It hampered me for years; and in the end I know I must have paid it twice over. I might have pleaded that I was under age when he got my signature, but it would have been scarcely honourable to do so."

"And you never profited by the transaction?"

"Never by a sixpence. It was done for Dawkes's accommodation, not mine. He ought to have paid it, you say? My dear, he is a man of straw, and never had fifteen hundred pounds of his own in his life."

"Does Lord Hartledon know of this? I wonder he has him here."

"I did not mention it at the time; and the thing's past and done with. I only tell you now to give you an idea of the nature of my embarrassments and scrapes. Not one in ten has really been incurred for myself: they only fall upon me. One must buy experience."

Terribly vexed was that sweet face, an almost painful sadness upon the generally sunny features.

"I will never give you up, Anne," he continued, with emotion. "I told the doctor so. I would rather give up life. And you know that your love is mine."

"But my duty is theirs. And if it came to a contest—Oh, Percival! you know, you know which would have to give place. Papa is so resolute in right."

"It's a shame that fortune should be so unequally divided!" cried the young man, resentfully. "Here's Edward with an income of thirty thousand a year, and I, his own brother, only a year or two younger, can't boast a fourth part as many hundreds!"

"Oh, Val! your father left you better off than that!"

"But so much of it went, Anne," was the gloomy answer. "I never understood the claims that came in against me, for my part. Edward had no debts to speak of; but then look at his allowance."

"He was the eldest son," she gently said.

"I know that. I am not wishing myself in Edward's place, or he out of it. I heartily wish him health and a long life to wear his honours; it is no fault of his that he should be rolling in riches, and I a martyr to poverty. Still, one can't help feeling at odd moments, when the shoe's pinching awfully, that the system is not altogether a just one."

"Was that a sincere wish, Val Elster?"

Val wheeled round on Lady Maude, from whom the question came. She had stolen up to them unperceived, and stood there in her radiant beauty, her magnificent dark eyes and her glowing cheeks set off by a little coquettish black-velvet hat.

"A sincere wish—that my brother should live long to enjoy his honours!" echoed Val, in a surprised tone. "Indeed it is. I hope he will live to a green old age, and leave goodly sons to succeed him."

Maude laughed. A brighter hue stole into her face, a softer shade to her eyes: she saw herself, as in a vision, the goodly mother of those goodly sons.

"Are you going to wear *that*?" she asked, touching the knot of ribbon in Miss Ashton's hands with her petulant fingers. "They are Lord Hartledon's colours."

"I shall wear it on Monday. Lord Hartledon gave it to me."

A rash avowal. The competitors, in a sort of joke, had each given away one knot of his own colours. Lady Maude had had three given to her; but she was looking for another worth them all—from Lord Hartledon. And now—it was given, it appeared, to Anne Ashton! For her very life she could not have helped the passionate taunt that escaped from her, not in words, but in tone:

"To *you*!"

"Kissing goes by favour," broke from the delicate lips of Val Elster, and Lady Maude could have struck him for the significant, saucy expression of his violet-blue eyes. "Edward loves Anne better than he ever loved his sisters; and for any other love—*that's* still far enough from his heart, Maude."

She had recovered herself instantly; cried out "Yes" to those in the distance, as if she heard a call, and went away humming a tune.

"Val, she loves your brother," whispered Anne.

"Do you think so? I do sometimes; and again I'm puzzled. She acts well if she does. The other day I told Edward she was in love with him: he laughed at me, and said I was dreaming; that if she had any love for him, it was cousin's love. What's more, Anne, he would prefer not to receive any other; so Maude need not look after him: it will be labour lost. Here comes that restless old dowager down upon us! I shall leave you to her, Anne. I never dare say my soul's my own in the presence of that woman."

Val strolled away as he spoke. He was not at ease that day, and the sharp, meddling old woman would have been intolerable. It was all very well to put a good face on matters to Anne, but he was in more perplexity than he cared to confess to. It seemed to him that he would rather die than give up Anne: and yet—in the straightforward, practical good sense of Dr. Ashton, he had a formidable adversary to deal with.

He suddenly found an arm inserted within his own, and saw it was his brother. Walking together thus, there was a great resemblance between them.

They were of the same height, much the same build; both were very good-looking men, but Percival had the nicer features; and he was fair, and his brother dark.

"What is this, Val, about a dispute with the doctor?" began Lord Hartledon.

"It was not a dispute," returned Val. "There were a few words, and I was hasty. However, I begged his pardon, and we parted good friends."

"Under a flag of truce, eh?"

"Something of that sort."

"Something of that sort!" repeated Lord Hartledon. "Don't you think, Val, it would be to your advantage if you trusted me more thoroughly than you do? Tell me the whole truth of your position, and let me see what can be done for you."

"There's not much to tell," returned Val, in his stupidity. Even with his brother his ultrasensitiveness clung to him; and he could no more have confessed the extent of his troubles than he could have taken wing that moment and soared away into the air. Val Elster was one of those who trust to things "coming right" with time.

"I have been talking to the doctor, Val. I called in just now to see Mrs. Ashton, and he spoke to me about you."

"Very kind of him, I'm sure!" retorted Val. "It is just this, Edward. He is vexed at what he calls my idle ways, and waste of time: as if I need plod on, like a city clerk, six days a week and no holidays! I know I must do something before I can win Anne; and I will do it: but the doctor need not begin to cry out about cancelling the engagement."

"How much do you owe, Val?"

"I can't tell."

Lord Hartledon thought this an evasion. But it was true. Val Elster knew he owed a great deal more than he could pay; but how much it might be on the whole, he had but a very faint idea.

"Well, Val, I have told the doctor I shall look into matters, and I hope to do it efficiently, for Anne's sake. I suppose the best thing will be to try and get you an appointment again."

"Oh, Edward, if you would! And you know you have the ear of the ministry."

"I dare say it can be managed. But this will be of little use if you are still to remain an embarrassed man. I hear you were afraid of arrest in London."

"Who told you that?"

"Dawkes."

"Dawkes! Then, Edward—" Val Elster stopped. In his vexation, he was about to retaliate on Captain Dawkes by a little revelation on the score of *his* affairs, certain things that might not have redounded to that gallant officer's credit. But he arrested the words in time: he was of a kindly nature, not fond of returning ill for ill. With all his follies, Val Elster could not remember to have committed an evil act in all his life, save one. And that one he had still the pleasure of paying for pretty deeply.

"Dawkes knows nothing of my affairs except from hearsay, Edward. I was once intimate with the man; but he served me a shabby trick, and that ended the friendship. I don't like him."

"I dare say what he said was not true," said Lord Hartledon kindly. "You might as well make a confidant of me. However, I have not time to talk to-day. We will go into the matter, Val, after Monday, when this race has come off, and see what arrangement can be made for you. There's only one thing bothers me."

"What's that?"

"The danger that it may be a wasted arrangement. If you are only set up on your legs to come down again, as you have before, it will be so much waste of time and money; so much loss, to me, of temper. Don't you see, Val?"

Percival Elster stopped in his walk, and withdrew his arm from his brother's; his face and voice full of emotion.

"Edward, I have learnt a lesson. What it has cost me I hardly yet know: but it is *learnt*. On my sacred word of honour, in the solemn presence of Heaven, I assert it, that I will never put my hand to another bill, whatever may be the temptation. I have overcome, in this respect at least, my sin."

"Your sin?"

"My nature's great sin; the besetting sin that has clung to me through life; the unfortunate sin that is my bane to this hour—cowardly irresolution."

"All right, Val; I see you mean well now. We'll talk of these matters next week. Instead of Elster's Folly, let it become Elster's Wisdom."

Lord Hartledon wrung his brother's hand and turned away. His eyes fell on Miss Ashton, and he went straight up to her. Putting the young lady's arm within his own, without word or ceremony, he took her off to a distance: and old Lady Kirton's skirts went round in a dance as she saw it.

"I am about to take him in hand, Anne, and set him going again: I have promised Dr. Ashton. We must get him a snug berth; one that even the doctor won't object to, and set him straight in other matters. If he has mortgaged his patrimony, it shall be redeemed. And, Anne, I think—I do think—he may be trusted to keep straight for the future."

Her soft sweet eyes sparkled with pleasure, and her lips parted with a sunny smile. Lord Hartledon took her hand within his own as it lay on his arm, and the furious old dowager saw it all from the distance.

"Don't say as much as this to him, Anne: I only tell you. Val is so sanguine, that it may be better not to tell him all beforehand. And I want, of course, first of all, to get a true list of—that is, a true statement of facts," he broke off, not caring to speak the word "debts" to that delicate girl before him. "He is my only brother; my father left him to me, for he knew what Val was; and I'll do my best for him. I'd do it for Val's own sake, apart from the charge. And, Anne, once Val is on his legs with an income, snug and comfortable, I shall recommend him to marry without delay; for, after all, you will be his greatest safeguard."

A blush suffused her face, and Lord Hartledon smiled.

Down came the countess-dowager.

"Here's that old dowager calling to me. She never lets me alone. Val sent me into a fit of laughter yesterday, saying she had designs on me for Maude. Poor deluded woman! Yes, ma'am, I hear. What is it?"

Mr. Elster went strolling along on the banks of the river, towards Calne; not with any particular purpose, but in his restless uneasiness. He had a tender conscience, and his past follies were pressing on it heavily. Of one thing he felt sure—that he was more deeply involved than Hartledon or anyone else suspected, perhaps even himself. The way was charming in fine weather, though less pleasant in winter. It was by no means a frequented road, and belonged of right to Lord Hartledon only; but it was open to all. Few chose it when they could traverse the more ordinary way. The narrow path on the green plain, sheltered by trees, wound in and out, now on the banks of the river, now hidden amidst a portion of the wood. Altogether it was a wild and lonely pathway; not one that a timid nature would choose on a dark night. You might sit in the wood, which lay to the left, a whole day through, and never see a soul.

One part of the walk was especially beautiful. A green hollow, where the turf was soft as moss; open to the river on the right, with a glimpse of the lovely scenery beyond; and on the left, the clustering trees of the wood. Yet further, through a break in the trees, might be seen a view of the houses of Calne. A little stream, or rivulet, trickled from the wood, and a rustic bridge—more for ornament than use, for a man with long legs could stride the stream well—was thrown over it. Val had reached thus far, when he saw someone standing on the bridge, his arms on the parapet, apparently in a brown study.

A dark, wild-looking man, whose face, at the first glimpse, seemed all hair. There was certainly a profusion of it; eyebrows, beard, whiskers, all heavy, and black as night. He was attired in loose fustian clothes with a red handkerchief wound round his throat, and a low slouching hat—one of those called wide-awake—partially concealed his features. By his side stood another man in plain, dark, rather seedy clothes, the coat outrageously long. He wore a cloth hat, whose brim hid his face, and he was smoking a cigar. Both men were slightly built and under middle height. This one was adorned with red whiskers.

The moment Mr. Elster set eyes on the dark one, he felt that he saw the man Pike before him. It happened that he had not met him during these few days of his sojourn; but some of the men staying at Hartledon had, and had said what a loose specimen he appeared to be. The other was a stranger, and did not look like a countryman at all.

Mr. Elster saw them both give a sharp look at him as he approached; and then they spoke together. Both stepped off the bridge, as though deferring to him, and stood aside as they watched him cross over, Pike touching his wide-awake.

"Good-day, my lord."

Val nodded by way of answer, and continued his stroll onwards. In the look he had taken at Pike, it struck him he had seen the face before: something in the countenance seemed familiar to his memory. And to his surprise he saw that the man was young.

The supposed reminiscence did not trouble him: he was too pre-occupied with thoughts of his own affairs to have leisure for Mr. Pike's. A short bit of road, and this rude, sheltered part of the way terminated in more open ground, where three paths diverged: one to the front of Hartledon; one to some cottages, and on through the wood to the high-road; and one towards the Rectory and Calne. Rural paths still, all of them; and the last was provided with a bench or two. Val Elster strolled on almost to the Rectory, and then turned back: he had no errand at Calne, and the Rectory he would rather keep out of just now. When he reached the little bridge Pike was on it alone; the other had disappeared. As before, he stepped off to make way for Mr. Elster.

"I beg pardon, sir, for addressing you just now as Lord Hartledon."

The salutation took Val by surprise; and though the voice seemed muffled, as though the man purposely mouthed his words, the accent and language were superior to anything he might have expected from one of Mr. Pike's appearance and reputed character.

"No matter," said Val, courteous even to Pike, in his kindly nature. "You mistook me for my brother. Many do."

"Not I," returned the man, assuming a freedom and a roughness at variance with his evident intelligence. "I know you for the Honourable Percival Elster."

"Ah," said Mr. Elster, a slight curiosity stirring his mind, but not sufficient to induce him to follow it up.

"But I like to do a good turn if I can," pursued Pike; "and I think, sir, I did one to you in calling you Lord Hartledon."

Val Elster had been passing on. He turned and looked at the man.

"Are you in any little temporary difficulty, might I ask?" continued Pike. "No offense, sir; princes have been in such before now."

Val Elster was so supremely conscious, especially in that reflective hour, of being in a "little difficulty" that might prove more than temporary, that he could only stare at the questioner and wait for more.

"No offence again, if I'm wrong," resumed Pike; "but if that man you saw here on the bridge is not looking after the Honourable Mr. Elster, I'm a fool."

"Why do you think this?" inquired Val, too fully aware that the fact was a likely one to attempt any reproof or disavowal.

"I'll tell you," said Pike; "I've said I don't mind doing a good turn when I can. The man arrived here this morning by the slow six train from London. He went into the Stag and had his breakfast, and has been covertly dodging about ever since. He inquired his way to Hartledon. The landlord of the Stag asked him what he wanted there, and got for answer that his brother was one of the grooms in my lord's service. Bosh! He went up, sneaking under the hedges and along by-ways, and took a view of the house, standing a good hour behind a tree while he did it. I was watching him."

It instantly struck Percival Elster, by one of those flashes of conviction that are no less sure than subtle, that Mr. Pike's interest in this watching arose from a fear that the stranger might have been looking after *him*. Pike continued:

"After he had taken his fill of waiting, he came dodging down this way, and I got into conversation with him. He wanted to know who I was. A poor devil out of work, I told him; a soldier once, but maimed and good for little now. We got chatty. I let him think he might trust me, and he began asking no end of questions about Mr. Elster: whether he went out much, what were his hours for going out, which road he mostly took in his walks, and how he could know him from his brother the earl; he had heard they were alike. The hound was puzzled; he had seen a dozen swells come out of Hartledon, any one of which might be Mr. Elster; but I found he had the description pretty accurate. Whilst we were talking, who should come into view but yourself! 'This is him!' cried he. 'Not a bit of it,' said I, carelessly; 'that's my lord.' Now you know, sir, why I saluted you as Lord Hartledon."

"Where is he now?" asked Percival Elster, feeling that he owed his present state of liberty to this lawless man.

Pike pointed to the narrow path in the wood, leading to the high-road. "I filled him up with the belief that the way beyond this bridge up to Hartledon was private, and he might be taken up for trespassing if he attempted to follow it; so he went off that way to watch the front. If the fellow hasn't a writ in his pocket, or something worse, call me a simpleton. You are all right, sir, as long as he takes you for Lord Hartledon."

But there was little chance the fellow could long take him for Lord Hartledon, and Percival Elster felt himself attacked with a shiver. He knew it to be worse than a writ; it was an arrest. An arrest is not a pleasant affair for any one; but a strong opinion—a certainty—seized upon Val's mind that this would bring forth Dr. Ashton's veto of separation from Anne.

"I thank you for what you have done," frankly spoke Mr. Elster.

"It's nothing, sir. He'll be dodging about after his prey; but I'll dodge about too, and thwart his game if I can, though I have to swear that Lord Hartledon's not himself. What's an oath, more or less, to me?"

"Where have I seen you before?" asked Val.

"Hard to say," returned Pike. "I have knocked about in many parts in my time."

"Are you from this neighbourhood?"

"Never was in these parts at all till a year or so ago. It's not two years yet."

"What are you doing here?"

"What I can. A bit of work when I can get it given to me. I went tramping the country after I left the regiment—"

"Then you have been a soldier?" interrupted Mr. Elster.

"Yes, sir. In tramping the country I came upon this place: I crept into a shed, and was there for some days; rheumatism took hold of me, and I couldn't move. It was something to find I had a roof of any sort over my head, and was let lie in it unmolested: and when I got better I stayed on."

"And have adopted it as your own, putting a window and a chimney into it! But do you know that Lord Hartledon may not choose to retain you as a tenant?"

"If Lord Hartledon should think of ousting me, I would ask Mr. Elster to intercede, in requital for the good turn I've done him this day," was the bold answer.

Mr. Elster laughed. "What is your name?"

"Tom Pike."

"I hear a great deal said of you, Pike, that's not pleasant; that you are a poacher, and a—"

"Let them that say so prove it," interrupted Pike, his dark brows contracting.

"But how do you manage to live?"

"That's my business, and not Calne's. At any rate, Mr. Elster, I don't steal."

"I heard a worse hint dropped of you than any I have mentioned," continued Val, after a pause.

"Tell it out, sir. Let's have the whole catalogue at once."

"That the night my brother, Mr. Elster, was shot, you were out with the poachers."

"I dare say you heard that I shot him, for I know it has been said," fiercely cried the man. "It's a black lie!—and the time may come when I shall ram it down Calne's throat. I swear that I never fired a shot that night; I swear that I no more had a hand in Mr. Elster's death than you had. Will you believe me, sir?"

The accents of truth are rarely to be mistaken, and Val was certain he heard them now. So far, he believed the man; and from that moment dismissed the doubt from his mind, if indeed he had not dismissed it before.

"Do you know who did fire the shot?"

"I do not; I was not out at all that night. Calne pitched upon me, because there was no one else in particular to pitch upon. A dozen poachers were in the fray, most of them with guns; little wonder the random shot from one should have found a mark. I know nothing more certain than that, so help—"

"That will do," interrupted Mr. Elster, arresting what might be coming; for he disliked strong language. "I believe you fully, Pike. What part of the country were you born in?"

"London. Born and bred in it."

"That I do not believe," he said frankly. "Your accent is not that of a Londoner."

"As you will, sir," returned Pike. "My mother was from Devonshire; but I was born and bred in London. I recognized that one with the writ for a fellow cockney at once; and for what he was, too—a sheriffs officer. Shouldn't be surprised but I knew him for one years ago."

Val Elster dropped a coin into the man's hand, and bade him good morning. Pike touched his wide-awake, and reiterated his intention of "dodging the enemy." But, as Mr. Elster cautiously pursued his way, the face he had just quitted continued to haunt him. It was not like any face he had ever seen, as far as he could remember; nevertheless ever and anon some reminiscence seemed to start out of it and vibrate upon a chord in his memory.

CHAPTER VII. LISTENERS

It was a somewhat singular coincidence, noted after the terrible event, now looming in the distance, had taken place, and when people began to weigh the various circumstances surrounding it, that Monday, the second day fixed for the boat-race, should be another day of rain. As though Heaven would have interposed to prevent it! said the thoughtful and romantic.

A steady, pouring rain; putting a stop again to the race for that day. The competitors might have been willing to face the elements themselves, but could not subject the fair spectators to the infliction. There was some inward discontent, and a great deal of outward grumbling; it did no good, and the race was put off until the next day.

Val Elster still retained his liberty. Very chary indeed had he been of showing himself outside the door on Saturday, once he was safely within it. Neither had any misfortune befallen Lord Hartledon. That unconscious victim must have contrived, in all innocence, to "dodge" the gentleman who was looking out for him, for they did not meet.

On the Sunday it happened that neither of the brothers went to church. Lord Hartledon, on awaking in the morning, found he had a sore throat, and would not get up. Val did not dare show himself out of doors. Not from fear of arrest that day, but lest any officious meddler should point him out as the real Simon Pure, Percival Elster. But for these circumstances, the man with the writ could hardly have remained under the delusion, as he appeared at church himself.

"Which is Lord Hartledon?" he whispered to his neighbour on the free benches, when the party from the great house had entered, and settled themselves in their pews.

"I don't see him. He has not come to-day."

"Which is Mr. Elster?"

"He has not come, either." So for that day recognition was escaped.

It was not to be so on the next. The rain, as I have said, came down, putting off the boat-race, and keeping Hartledon's guests indoors all the morning; but late in the afternoon some unlucky star put it into Lord Hartledon's head to go down to the Rectory. His throat was better—almost well again; and he was not a man to coddle himself unnecessarily.

He paid his visit, stayed talking a considerable time with Mrs. Ashton, whose company he liked, and took his departure about six o'clock. "You and Anne might almost walk up with me," he remarked to the doctor as he shook hands; for the Rector and Miss Ashton were to dine at Hartledon that day. It was to have been the crowning festival to the boat-race—the race which now had not taken place.

Lord Hartledon looked up at the skies, and found he had no occasion to open his umbrella, for the rain had ceased. Sundry bright rays in the west seemed to give hope that the morrow would be fair; and, rejoicing in this cheering prospect, he crossed the broad Rectory lawn. As he went through the gate some one laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"The Honourable Percival Elster, I believe?"

Lord Hartledon looked at the intruder. A seedy man, with a long coat and red whiskers, who held out something to him.

"Who are you?" he asked, releasing his shoulder by a sharp movement.

"I'm sorry to do it, sir; but you know we are only the agent of others in these affairs. You are my prisoner, sir."

"Indeed!" said Lord Hartledon, taking the matter coolly. "You have got hold of the wrong man for once. I am not Mr. Percival Elster."

The capturer laughed: a very civil laugh. "It won't do, sir; we often have that trick tried on us."

"But I tell you I am *not* Mr. Elster," he reiterated, speaking this time with some anger. "I am Lord Hartledon."

He of the loose coat shook his head. He had his hand again on the supposed Mr. Elster's arm, and told him he must go with him.

"You cannot take me; you cannot arrest a peer. This is simply ridiculous," continued Lord Hartledon, almost laughing at the real absurdity of the thing. "Any child in Calne could tell you who I am."

"As well make no words over it, sir. It's only waste of time."

"You have a warrant—as I understand—to arrest Mr. Percival Elster?"

"Yes, sir, I have. The man that was looking for you in London got taken ill, and couldn't come down, so our folks sent me. 'You'll know him by his good looks,' said they; 'an aristocrat every inch of him.' Don't give me trouble, sir."

"Well now—I am not Percival Elster: I am his brother, Lord Hartledon. You cannot take one brother for another; and, what's more, you had better not try to do it. Stay! Look here."

He pulled out his card-case, and showed his cards—"Earl of Hartledon." He exhibited a couple of letters that happened to be about him—"The Right Honble. the Earl of Hartledon." It was of no use.

"I've known that dodge tried before too," said his obstinate capturer.

Lord Hartledon was growing more angry. He saw some proof must be tendered before he could regain his liberty. Jabez Gum happened to be standing at his gate opposite, and he called to him.

"Will you be so kind as to tell this man who I am, Mr. Gum. He is mistaking me for some one else."

"This is the Earl of Hartledon," said Jabez, promptly.

A moment's hesitation on the officer's part; but he felt too sure of his man to believe this. "I'll take the risk," said he, stolidly. "Where's the good of your holding out, Mr. Elster?"

"Come this way, then!" cried Lord Hartledon, beginning to lose his temper. "And if you carry this too far, my man, I'll have you punished."

He went striding up to the Rectory. Had he taken a moment for consideration, he might have turned away, rather than expose this misfortune of Val's there. The doctor came into the hall, and was recognized as the Rector, and there was some little commotion; Anne's white face looking on from a distance. The man was convinced, and took his departure, considerably crestfallen.

"What is the amount?" called the doctor, sternly.

"Not very much, *this*, sir. It's under three hundred."

Which was as much as to say there was more behind it. Dr. Ashton mentally washed his hands of Percival Elster as a future son-in-law.

The first intimation that ill-starred gentleman received of the untoward turn affairs were taking was from the Rector himself.

Mr. Percival Elster had been chuckling over that opportune sore throat, as a means of keeping his brother indoors; and it never occurred to him that Lord Hartledon would venture out at all on the Monday. Being a man with his wits about him, it had not failed to occur to his mind that there was a possibility of Lord Hartledon's being arrested in place of himself; but so long as Hartledon kept indoors the danger was averted. Had Percival Elster seen his brother go out he might have plucked up courage to tell him the state of affairs.

But he did not see him. Lounging idly—what else had he, a poor prisoner, to do?—in the sunny society of Maude Kirton and other attractive girls, Mr. Elster was unconscious of the movements of the household in general. He was in his own room dressing for dinner when the truth burst upon him.

Dr. Ashton was a straightforward; practical man—it has been already stated—who went direct to the point at once in any matters of difficulty. He arrived at Hartledon a few minutes before the dinner-hour, found Mr. Elster was yet in his dressing-room, and went there to him.

The news, the cool, scornful anger of the Rector, the keen question—"Was he mad?" burst upon the unhappy Val like a clap of thunder. He was standing in his shirt-sleeves, ready to go down, all but his coat and waistcoat, his hair-brushes in the uplifted hands. Hands and brushes had been arrested midway in the shock. The calm clerical man; all the more terrible then because of his calmness; standing there with his cold stinging words, and his unhappy culprit facing him, conscious of his heinous sins—the worst sin of all: that of being found out.

"Others have done so much before me, sir, and have not made the less good men," spoke Val, in his desperation.

Dr. Ashton could not help admiring the man, as he stood there in his physical beauty. In spite of his inward anger, his condemnation, his disappointment—and they were all very great—the good looks of Percival Elster struck him forcibly with a sort of annoyance: why should these men be so outwardly fair, so inwardly frail? Those good looks had told upon his daughter's heart; and they all loved *her*, and could not bear to cause her pain. Tall, supple, graceful, strong, towering nearly a head above the doctor, he stood, his pleasing features full of the best sort of attraction, his violet eyes rather wider open than usual, the waves of his silken hair smooth and bright. "If he were only half as fair in conduct as in looks!" muttered the grieved divine.

But those violet eyes, usually beaming with kindness, suddenly changed their present expression of depreciation to one of rage. Dr. Ashton gave a pretty accurate description of how the crisis had been brought to his knowledge—that Lord Hartledon had come to the Rectory, with his mistaken assailant, to be identified; and Percival Elster's anger was turned against his brother. Never in all his life had he been in so great a passion; and having to suppress its signs in the presence of the Rector only made the fuel burn more fiercely. To ruin him with the doctor by going *there* with the news! Anywhere else—anywhere but the Rectory!

Hedges, the butler, interrupted the conference. Dinner was waiting. Lord Hartledon looked at Val as the two entered the room, and was rather surprised at the furious gaze of reproach that was cast back on him.

Miss Ashton was not there. No, of course not! It needed not Val's glance around to be assured of that. Of course they were to be separated from that hour; the fiat was already gone forth. And Mr. Val Elster felt so savage that he could have struck his brother. He heard Dr. Ashton's reply to an inquiry—that Mrs. Ashton was feeling unusually poorly, and Anne remained at home with her—but he looked upon it as an evasion. Not a word did he speak during dinner: not a word, save what was forced from him by common courtesy, spoke he after the ladies had left the room; he only drank a great deal of wine.

A very unusual circumstance for Val Elster. With all his weak resolution, his yielding nature, drinking was a fault he was scarcely ever seduced into. Not above two or three times in his life could he remember to have exceeded the bounds of strict, temperate sobriety. The fact was, he was in wrath with himself: all his past follies were pressing upon him with bitter condemnation. He was just in that frame of mind when an object to vent our fury upon becomes a sort of necessity; and Mr. Elster's was vented on his brother.

He was waiting at boiling-point for the opportunity to "have it out" with him: and it soon came. As the gentlemen left the dining-room—and in these present days they do not, as a rule, sit long, especially when the host is a young man—Percival Elster touched his brother to detain him, and shut the door on the heels of the rest.

Lord Hartledon was surprised. Val's attack was so savage. He was talking off his superfluous wrath, and the wine he had taken did not tend to cool his heat. Lord Hartledon, vexed at the injustice, lost his temper; and for once there was a quarrel, sharp and loud, between the brothers. It did not last long; in its very midst they parted; throwing cutting words one at the other. Lord Hartledon quitted the room, to join his guests; Val Elster strode outside the window to cool his brain.

But now, look at the obstinate pride of those two foolish men! They were angry with each other in temper, but not in heart. In Percival Elster's conscience there was an underlying conviction that his brother had acted only in thoughtless impulse when he carried the misfortune to the Rectory; whilst Lord Hartledon was even then full of plans for serving Val, and considered he had more need to help him than ever. A day or two given to the indulgence of their anger, and they would be firmer friends than ever.

The large French window of the dining-room, opening to the ground, was flung back by Val Elster; and he stepped forth into the cool night, which was beautifully fine. The room looked towards the river. The velvet lawn, wet with the day's rain, lay calm and silent under the bright stars; the flowers, clustering around far and wide, gave out their sweet and heavy night perfume. Not an instant had he been outside when he became conscious that some figure was gliding towards him—was almost close to him; and he recognised Mr. Pike. Yes, that worthy gentleman appeared to be only then arriving on his evening visit: in point of fact, he had been glued ear and eye to the window during the quarrel.

"What do you want?" demanded Mr. Elster.

"Well, I came up here hoping to get a word with you, sir," replied the man in his rough, abrupt manner, more in character with his appearance and lawless reputation than with his accent and unmistakable intelligence. "There was a nasty accident a few hours ago: that shark came across his lordship."

"I know he did," savagely spoke Val. "The result of your informing him that I was Lord Hartledon."

"I did it for the best, Mr. Elster. He'd have nabbed you that very time, but for my putting him off the scent as I did."

"Yes, yes, I am aware you did it for the best, and I suppose it turned out to be so," quickly replied Val, some of his native kindness resuming its sway. "It's an unfortunate affair altogether, and that's the best that can be said of it."

"What I came up here for was to tell you he was gone."

"Who is gone?"

"The shark."

"Gone!"

"He went off by the seven train. Lord Hartledon told him he'd communicate with his principals and see that the affair was arranged. It satisfied the man, and he went away by the next train—which happened to be the seven-o'clock one."

"How do you know this?" asked Mr. Elster.

"This way," was the answer. "I was hovering about outside that shed of mine, and I saw the encounter at the parson's gate—for that's where it took place. The first thing the fellow did when it was all over was to bolt across the road, and accuse me of purposely misleading him. 'Not a bit of it,' said I; 'if I did mislead you, it was unintentional, for I took the one who came over the bridge on Saturday to be Lord Hartledon, safe as eggs. But they have been down here only a week,' I went on, 'and I suppose I don't know 'em apart yet.' I can't say whether he believed me; I think he did; he's a soft sort of chap. It was all right, he said: the earl had passed his word to him that it should be made so without his arresting Mr. Elster, and he was off to London at once."

"And he has gone?"

Mr. Pike nodded significantly. "I watched him go; dodged him up to the station and saw him off."

Then this one danger was over! Val might breathe freely again.

"And I thought you would like to know the coast was clear; so I came up to tell you," concluded Pike.

"Thank you for your trouble," said Mr. Elster. "I shall not forget it."

"You'll remember it, perhaps, if a question arises touching that shed," spoke the man. "I may need a word sometime with Lord Hartledon."

"I'll remember it, Pike. Here, wait a moment. Is Thomas Pike your real name?"

"Well, I conclude it is. Pike was the name of my father and mother. As to Thomas—not knowing where I was christened, I can't go and look at the register; but they never called me anything but Tom. Did you wish to know particularly?"

There was a tone of mockery in the man's answer, not altogether acceptable to his hearer; and he let him go without further hindrance. But the man turned back in an instant of his own accord.

"I dare say you are wanting to know why I did you this little turn, Mr. Elster. I have been caught in corners myself before now; and if I can help anybody to get out of them without trouble to myself, I'm willing to do it. And to circumvent these law-sharks comes home to my spirit as wholesome refreshment."

Mr. Pike finally departed. He took the lonely way, and only struck into the high-road opposite his own domicile, the shed. Passing round it, he hovered at its rude door—the one he had himself made, along with the ruder window—and then, treading softly, he stepped to the low stile in the hedge, which had for years made the boundary between the waste land on which the shed stood and Clerk Gum's garden. Here he halted a minute, looking all ways. Then he stepped over the stile, crouched down amongst Mr. Gum's cabbages, got under shelter of the hedge, and so stole onwards, until he came to an anchor at the kitchen-window, and laid his ear to the shutter, just as it had recently been laid against the glass in the dining-room of my Lord Hartledon.

That he had a propensity for prying into the private affairs of his neighbours near and distant, there could be little doubt about. Mr. Pike, however, was not destined on this one occasion to reap any substantial reward. The kitchen appeared to be wrapped in perfect silence. Satisfying himself as to this, he next took off his heavy shoes, stole past the back door, and so round the clerk's house to the front. Very softly indeed went he, creeping by the wall, and emerging at last round the angle, by the window of the best parlour. Here, most excessively to Mr. Pike's consternation, he came upon a lady doing exactly what he had come to do—namely, stealthily listening at the window to anything there might be to hear inside.

The shrill scream she gave when she found her face in contact with the wild intruder, might have been heard over at Dr. Ashton's. Clerk Gum, who had been quietly writing in his office, came out in haste, and recognized Mrs. Jones, the wife of the surly porter at the station, and step-mother to the troublesome young servant, Rebecca. Pike had totally disappeared.

Mrs. Jones, partly through fright, partly in anger arising from a long-standing grievance, avowed the truth boldly: she had been listening at the parlour-shutters ever since she went out of the house ten minutes ago, and had been set upon by that wolf Pike.

"Set upon!" exclaimed the clerk, looking swiftly in all directions for the offender.

"I don't know what else you can call it, when a highway robber—a murderer, if all tales be true—steals round upon you without warning, and glares his eyes into yours," shrieked Mrs. Jones wrathfully. "And if he wasn't barefoot, Gum, my eyes strangely deceived me. I'd have you and Nancy take care of your throats."

She turned into the house, to the best parlour, where the clerk's wife was sitting with a visitor, Mirrable. Mrs. Gum, when she found what the commotion had been about, gave a sharp cry of terror, and shook from head to foot.

"On our premises! Close to our house! That dreadful man! Oh, Lydia, don't you think you were mistaken?"

"Mistaken!" retorted Mrs. Jones. "That wild face isn't one to be mistaken: I should like to see its fellow in Calne. Why Lord Hartledon don't have him taken up on suspicion of that murder, is odd to me."

"You'd better hold your tongue about that suspicion," interposed Mirrable. "I have cautioned you before, I shouldn't like to breathe a word against a desperate man; I should go about in fear that he might hear of it, and revenge himself."

In came the clerk. "I don't see a sign of any one about," he said; "and I'm sure whoever it was could not have had time to get away. You must have been mistaken, Mrs. Jones."

"Mistaken in what, pray?"

"That any man was there. You got confused, and fancied it, perhaps. As to Pike, he'd never dare come on my premises, whether by night or day. What were you doing at the window?"

"Listening," defiantly replied Mrs. Jones. "And now I'll just tell out what I've had in my head this long while, Mr. Gum, and know the reason of Nancy's slighting me in the way she does. What secret has she and Mary Mirrable got between them?"

"Secret?" repeated the clerk, whilst his wife gave a faint cry, and Mirrable turned her calm face on Mrs. Jones. "Have they a secret?"

"Yes, they have," raved Mrs. Jones, giving vent to her long pent-up emotion. "If they haven't, I'm blind and deaf. If I have come into your house once during the past year and found Mrs. Mirrable in it, and the two sitting and whispering, I've come ten times. This evening I came in at dusk; I turned the handle of the door and peeped into the best parlour, and there they were, nose and knees together, starting away from each other as soon as they saw me, Nance giving one of her faint cries, and the two making believe to have been talking of the weather. It's always so. And I want to know what secret they have got hold of, and whether I'm poison, that I can't be trusted with it."

Jabez Gum slowly turned his eyes on the two in question. His wife lifted her hands in deprecation at the idea that she should have a secret: Mirrable was laughing.

"Nancy's secret to-night, when you interrupted us, was telling me of a dream she had regarding Lord Hartledon, and of how she mistook Mr. Elster for him the morning he came down," cried the latter. "And if you have really been listening at the shutters since you went out, Mrs. Jones, you should by this time know how to pickle walnuts in the new way: for I declare that is all our conversation has been about since. You always were suspicious, you know, and you always will be."

"Look here, Mrs. Jones," said the clerk, decisively; "I don't choose to have my shutters listened at: it might give the house a bad name, for quarrelling, or something of that sort. So I'll trouble you not to repeat what you have done to-night, or I shall forbid your coming here. A secret, indeed!"

"Yes, a secret!" persisted Mrs. Jones. "And if I don't come at what it is one of these days, my name's not Lydia Jones. And I'll tell you why. It strikes me—I may be wrong—but it strikes me it concerns me and my husband and my household, which some folks are ever ready to interfere with. I'll take myself off now; and I would recommend you, as a parting warning, to denounce Pike to the police for an attempt at housebreaking, before you're both murdered in your bed. That'll be the end on't."

She went away, and Clerk Gum wished he could denounce *her* to the police. Mirrable laughed again; and Mrs. Gum, cowardly and timid, fell back in her chair as one seized with ague.

Beyond giving an occasional dole to Mrs. Jones for her children—and to tell the truth, she clothed them all, or they would have gone in rags—Mirrable had shaken her cousin off long ago: which of course did not tend to soothe the naturally jealous spirit of Mrs. Jones. At Hartledon House she was not welcomed, and could not go there; but she watched for the visits of Mirrable at the clerk's, and was certain to intrude on those occasions.

"I'll find it out!" she repeated to herself, as she went storming through the garden-gate; "I'll find it out. And as to that poacher, he'd better bring his black face near mine again!"

CHAPTER VIII. THE WAGER BOATS

Tuesday morning rose, bright and propitious: a contrast to the two previous days arranged for the boat-race. All was pleasure, bustle, excitement at Hartledon: but the coolness that had arisen between the brothers was noticed by some of the guests. Neither of them was disposed to take the first step towards reconciliation: and, indeed, a little incident that occurred that morning led to another ill word between them. An account that had been standing for more than two years was sent in to Lord Hartledon's steward; it was for some harness, a saddle, a silver-mounted whip, and a few trifles of that sort, supplied by a small tradesman in the village. Lord Hartledon protested there was nothing of the sort owing; but upon inquiry the debtor proved to be Mr. Percival Elster. Lord Hartledon, vexed that any one in the neighbourhood should have waited so long for his money, said a sharp word on the score to Percival; and the latter retorted as sharply that it was no business of his. Again Val was angry with himself, and thus gave vent to his temper. The fact was, he had completely forgotten the trifling debt, and was as vexed as Hartledon that it should have been allowed to remain unpaid: but the man had not sent him any reminder whilst he was away.

"Pay it to-day, Marris," cried Lord Hartledon to his steward. "I won't have this sort of thing at Calne."

His tone was one of irritation—or it sounded so to the ears of his conscious brother, and Val bit his lips. After that, throughout the morning, they maintained a studied silence towards each other; and this was observed, but was not commented on. Val was unusually quiet altogether: he was saying to himself that he was sullen.

The starting-hour for the race was three o'clock; but long before that time the scene was sufficiently animated, not to say exciting. It was a most lovely afternoon. Not a trace remained of the previous day's rain; and the river—wide just there, as it took the sweeping curve of the point—was dotted with these little wager boats. Their owners for the time being, in their white boating-costume, each displaying his colours, were in highest spirits; and the fair gazers gathered on the banks were anxious as to the result. The favourite was Lord Hartledon—by long odds, as Mr. Shute grumbled. Had his lordship been known not to possess the smallest chance, nine of those fair girls out of ten would, nevertheless, have betted upon him. Some of them were hoping to play for a deeper stake than a pair of gloves. A staff, from which fluttered a gay little flag, had been driven into the ground, exactly opposite the house; it was the starting and the winning point. At a certain distance up the river, near to the mill, a boat was moored in mid-stream: this they would row round, and come back again.

At three o'clock they were to take the boats; and, allowing for time being wasted in the start, might be in again and the race won in three-quarters-of-an-hour. But, as is often the case, the time was not adhered to; one hindrance after another occurred; there was a great deal of laughing and joking, forgetting of things, and of getting into order; and at a quarter to four they were not off. But all were ready at last, and most of the rowers were each in his little cockle-shell. Lord Hartledon lingered yet in the midst of the group of ladies, all clustered together at one spot, who were keeping him with their many comments and questions. Each wore the colours of her favourite: the crimson and purple predominating, for they were those of their host. Lady Kirton displayed her loyalty in a conspicuous manner. She had an old crimson gauze skirt on, once a ball-dress, with ends of purple ribbon floating from it and fluttering in the wind; and a purple head-dress with a crimson feather. Maude, in a spirit of perversity, displayed a blue shoulder-knot, timidly offered to her by a young Oxford man who was staying there, Mr. Shute; and Anne Ashton wore the colours given her by Lord Hartledon.

"I can't stay; you'd keep me here all day: don't you see they are waiting for me?" he laughingly cried, extricating himself from the throng. "Why, Anne, my dear, is it you? How is it I did not see you before? Are you here alone?"

She had not long joined the crowd, having come up late from the Rectory, and had been standing outside, for she never put herself forward anywhere. Lord Hartledon drew her arm within his own for a moment and took her apart.

"Arthur came up with me: I don't know where he is now. Mamma was afraid to venture, fearing the grass might be damp."

"And the Rector *of course* would not countenance us by coming," said Lord Hartledon, with a laugh. "I remember his prejudices against boating of old."

"He is coming to dinner."

"As you all are; Arthur also to-day. I made the doctor promise that. A jolly banquet we'll have, too, and toast the winner. Anne, I just wanted to say this to you; Val is in an awful rage with me for letting that matter get to the ears of your father, and I am not pleased with him; so altogether we are just now treating each other to a dose of sullenness, and when we do speak it's to growl like two amiable bears; but it shall make no difference to what I said last week. All shall be made smooth, even to the satisfaction of your father. You may trust me."

He ran off from her, stepped into the skiff, and was taking the sculls, when he uttered a sudden exclamation, leaped out again, and began to run with all speed towards the house.

"What is it? Where are you going?" asked the O'Moore, who was the appointed steward.

"I have forgotten—" *What*, they did not catch; the word was lost on the air.

"It is bad luck to turn back," called out Maude. "You won't win."

He was already half-way to the house. A couple of minutes after entering it he reappeared again, and came flying down the slopes at full speed. Suddenly his foot slipped, and he fell to the ground. The only one who saw the accident was Mr. O'Moore; the general attention at that moment being concentrated upon the river. He hastened back. Hartledon was then gathering himself up, but slowly.

"No damage," said he; "only a bit of a wrench to the foot. Give me your arm for a minute, O'Moore. This ground must be slippery from yesterday's rain."

Mr. O'Moore held out his arm, and Hartledon took it. "The ground is not slippery, Hart; it's as dry as a bone."

"Then what caused me to slip?"

"The rate you were coming at. Had you not better give up the contest, and rest?"

"Nonsense! My foot will be all right in the skiff. Let us get on; they'll all be out of patience."

When it was seen that something was amiss with him, that he leaned rather heavily on the O'Moore, eager steps pressed round him. Lord Hartledon laughed, making light of it; he had been so clumsy as to stumble, and had twisted his ankle a little. It was nothing.

"Stay on shore and give it a rest," cried one, as he stepped once more into the little boat. "I am sure you are hurt."

"Not I. It will have rest in the boat. Anne," he said, looking up at her with his pleasant smile, "do you wear my colours still?"

She touched the knot on her bosom, and smiled back to him, her tone full of earnestness. "I would wear them always."

And the countess-dowager, in her bedecked flounces and crimson feather, looked as if she would like to throw the knot and its wearer into the river, in the wake of the wager boats. After one or two false starts, they got off at last.

"Do you think it seemly, this flirtation of yours with Lord Hartledon?"

Anne turned in amazement. The face of the old dowager was close to her; the snub nose and rouged cheeks and false flaxen front looked ready to eat her up.

"I have no flirtation with Lord Hartledon, Lady Kirton; or he with me. When I was a child, and he a great boy, years older, he loved me and petted me as a little sister: I think he does the same still."

"My daughter tells me you are counting upon one of the two. If I say to you, do not be too sanguine of either, I speak as a friend; as your mother might speak. Lord Hartledon is already appropriated; and Val Elster is not worth appropriating."

Was she mad? Anne Ashton looked at her, really doubting it. No, she was only vulgar-minded, and selfish, and utterly impervious to all sense of shame in her scheming. Instinctively Anne moved a pace further off.

"I do not think Lord Hartledon is appropriated yet," spoke Anne, in a little spirit of mischievous retaliation. "That some amongst his present guests would be glad to appropriate him may be likely enough; but what if he is not willing to be appropriated? He said to Mr. Elster, last week, that they were wasting their time."

"Who's Mr. Elster?" cried the angry dowager. "What right has he to be at Hartledon, poking his nose into everything that does not concern him?—what right has he, I ask?"

"The right of being Lord Hartledon's brother," carelessly replied Anne.

"It is a right he had best not presume upon," rejoined Lady Kirton. "Brothers are brothers as children; but the tie widens as they grow up and launch out into their different spheres. There's not a man of all Hartledon's guests but has more right to be here than Val Elster."

"Yet they are brothers still."

"Brothers! I'll take care that Val Elster presumes no more upon the tie when Maude reigns at—"

For once the countess-dowager caught up her words. She had said more than she had meant to say. Anne Ashton's calm sweet eyes were bent upon her, waiting for more.

"It is true," she said, giving a shake to the purple tails, and taking a sudden resolution, "Maude is to be his wife; but I ought not to have let it slip out. It was unintentional; and I throw myself on your honour, Miss Ashton."

"But it is not true?" asked Anne, somewhat perplexed.

"It *is* true. Hartledon has his own reasons for keeping it quiet at present; but—you'll see when the time comes. Should I take upon myself so much rule here, but that it is to be Maude's future home?"

"I don't believe it," cried Anne, as the old story-teller sailed off. "That she loves him, and that her mother is anxious to secure him, is evident; but he is truthful and open, and would never conceal it. No, no, Lady Maude! you are cherishing a false hope. You are very beautiful, but you are not worthy of him; and I should not like you for my sister-in-law at all. That dreadful old countess-dowager! How she dislikes Val, and how rude she is! I'll try not to come in her way again after to-day, as long as they are at Hartledon."

"What are you thinking of, Anne?"

"Oh, not much," she answered, with a soft blush, for the questioner was Mr. Elster. "Do you think your brother has hurt himself much, Val?"

"I didn't know he had hurt himself at all," returned Val rather coolly, who had been on the river at the time in somebody's skiff, and saw nothing of the occurrence. "What has he done?"

"He slipped down on the slopes and twisted his ankle. I suppose they will be coming back soon."

"I suppose they will," was the answer. Val seemed in an ungracious mood. He and Mr. O'Moore and young Carteret were the only three who had remained behind. Anne asked Val why he did not go and look on; and he answered, because he didn't want to.

It was getting on for five o'clock when the boats were discerned returning. How they clustered on the banks, watching the excited rowers, some pale with their exertions, others in a white heat! Captain Dawkes was first, and was doing all he could to keep so; but when only a boat's length from the winning-post another shot past him, and won by half a length. It was the young Oxonian, Mr. Shute—though indeed it does not much matter who it was, save that it was not Lord Hartledon.

"Strike your colours, ladies, you that sport the crimson and purple!" called out a laughing voice from one of the skiffs. "Oxford blue wins."

Lord Hartledon arrived last. He did not get up for some minutes after the rest were in. In short, he was distanced.

"Hart has hurt his arm as well as his foot," observed one of the others, as he came alongside. "That's why he got distanced."

"No, it was not," dissented Lord Hartledon, looking up from his skiff at the crowd of fair faces bent down upon him. "My arm is all right; it only gave me a few twinges when I first started. My oar fouled, and I could not get right again; so, finding I had lost too much ground, I gave up the contest. Anne, had I known I should disgrace my colours, I would not have given them to *you*."

"Miss Ashton loses, and Maude wins!" cried the countess-dowager, executing a little dance of triumph. "Maude is the only one who wears the Oxford blue."

It was true. The young Oxonian was a retiring and timid man, and none had voluntarily assumed his colours. But no one heeded the countess-dowager.

"You are like a child, Hartledon, denying that your arm's damaged!" exclaimed Captain Dawkes. "I know it is: I could see it by the way you struck your oar all along."

What feeling is it in man that prompts him to disclaim physical pain?—make light of personal injury? Lord Hartledon's ankle was swelling, at the bottom of the boat; and without the slightest doubt his arm *was* paining him, although perhaps at the moment not very considerably. But he maintained his own assertions, and protested his arm was as sound as the best arm present. "I could go over the work again with pleasure," cried he.

"Nonsense, Hart! You could not."

"And I *will* go over it," he added, warming with the opposition. "Who'll try his strength with me? There's plenty of time before dinner."

"I will," eagerly spoke young Carteret, who had been, as was remarked, one of those on land, and was wild to be handling the oars. "If Dawkes will let me have his skiff, I'll bet you ten to five you are distanced again, Hartledon."

Perhaps Lord Hartledon had not thought his challenge would be taken seriously. But when he saw the eager, joyous look of the boy Carteret—he was not yet nineteen—the flushed pleasure of the beardless face, he would not have retracted it for the world. He was just as good-natured as Percival Elster.

"Dawkes will let you have his skiff, Carteret."

Captain Dawkes was exceedingly glad to be rid of it. Good boatman though he was, he rarely cared to spend his strength superfluously, when nothing was to be gained by it, and had no fancy to row his skiff back to its moorings, as most of the others were already doing with theirs. He leaped out.

"Any one but you, Hartledon, would be glad to come out of that tilting thing, and enjoy a rest, and get your face cool," cried the countess-dowager.

"I dare say they might, ma'am. I'm afraid I am given to obstinacy; always was. Be quick, Carteret."

Mr. Carteret was hastily stripping himself of his coat, and any odds and ends of attire he deemed superfluous. "One moment, Hartledon; only one moment," came the joyous response.

"And you'll come home with your arm and your ankle like your colours, Hartledon—crimson and purple," screamed the dowager. "And you'll be laid up, and go on perhaps to locked jaw; and then you'll expect me to nurse you!"

"I shall expect nothing of the sort, ma'am, I pledge you my word; I'll nurse myself. All ready, Carteret?"

"All ready. Same point as before, Hart?"

"Same point: round the boat and home again."

"And it's ten sovs. to five, Hart?"

"All right. You'll lose, Carteret."

Carteret laughed. He saw the five sovereigns as surely in his possession as he saw the sculls in his hands. There was no trouble with the start this time, and they were off at once.

Lord Hartledon took the lead. He was spurring his strength to the uttermost: perhaps out of bravado; that he might show them nothing was the matter with his arm. But Mr. Carteret gained on him; and as they turned the point and went out of sight, the young man's boat was the foremost.

The race had been kept—as the sporting men amongst them styled it—dark. Not an inkling of it had been suffered to get abroad, or, as Lord Hartledon had observed, they should have the banks swarming. The consequence was, that not more than half-a-dozen curious idlers had assembled: those were on the opposite side, and had now gone down with the boats to Calne. No spectators, either on the river or the shore, attended this lesser contest: Lord Hartledon and Mr. Carteret had it all to themselves.

And meanwhile, during the time Lord Hartledon had remained at rest in his skiff under the winning flag, Percival Elster never addressed one word to him. There he stood, on the edge of the bank; but not a syllable spoke he, good, bad, or indifferent.

Miss Ashton was looking for her brother, and might just as well have looked for a needle in a bottle of hay. Arthur was off somewhere.

"You need not go home yet, Anne," said Val.

"I must. I have to dress for dinner. It is all to be very smart to-night, you know," she said, with a merry laugh.

"With Shute in the post of honour. Who'd have thought that awkward, quiet fellow would win? I will see you home, Anne, if you must go."

Miss Ashton coloured vividly with embarrassment. In the present state of affairs, she did not know whether that might be permitted: poor Val was out of favour at the Rectory. He detected the feeling, and it tended to vex him more and more.

"Nonsense, Anne! The veto has not yet been interposed, and they can't kill you for allowing my escort. Stay here if you like: if you go, I shall see you home."

It was quite imperative that she should go, for dinner at Hartledon was that evening fixed for seven o'clock, and there would be little enough time to dress and return again. They set out, walking side by side. Anne told him of what Lord Hartledon had said to her that day; and Val coloured with shame at the sullenness he had displayed, and his heart went into a glow of repentance. Had he met his brother then, he had clasped his hand, and poured forth his contrition.

He met some one else instead, almost immediately. It was Dr. Ashton, coming for Anne. Percival was not wanted now: was not invited to continue his escort. A cold, civil word or two passed, and Val struck across the grove into the high-road, and returned to Hartledon.

He was about to turn in at the lodge-gates with his usual greeting to Mrs. Capper when his attention was caught by a figure coming down the avenue. A man in a long coat, his face ornamented with red whiskers. It required no second glance for recognition. Whiskers and coat proclaimed their owner at once; and if ever Val Elster's heart leaped into his mouth, it certainly leaped then.

He went on, instead of turning in; quietly, as if he were only a stranger enjoying an evening stroll up the road; but the moment he was past the gates he set off at breakneck speed, not heeding where. That the man was there to arrest him, he felt as sure as he had ever felt of anything in this world; and in his perplexity he began accusing every one of treachery, Lord Hartledon and Pike in particular.

The river at the back in this part took a sweeping curve, the road kept straight; so that to arrive at a given point, the one would be more quickly traversed than the other. On and on went Val Elster; and as soon as an opening allowed, he struck into the brushwood on the right, intending to make his way back by the river to Hartledon.

But not yet. Not until the shades of night should fall on the earth: he would have a better chance of getting away from that shark in the darkness than by daylight. He propped his back against a tree

and waited, hating himself all the time for his cowardice. With all his scrapes and dilemmas, he had never been reduced to this sort of hiding.

And his pursuer had struck into the wood after him, passed straight through it, though with some little doubt and difficulty, and was already by the river-side, getting there just as Lord Hartledon was passing in his skiff. Long as this may have seemed in telling, it took only a short time to accomplish; still Lord Hartledon had not made quick way, or he would have been further on his course in the race.

Would the sun ever set?—daylight ever pass? Val thought *not*, in his impatience; and he ventured out of his shelter very soon, and saw for his reward—the long coat and red whiskers by the river-side, their owner conversing with a man. Val went further away, keeping the direction of the stream: the brushwood might no longer be safe. He did not think they had seen him: the man he dreaded had his back to him, the other his face. And that other was Pike.

CHAPTER IX. WAITING FOR DINNER

Dinner at Hartledon had been ordered for seven o'clock. It was beyond that hour when Dr. Ashton arrived, for he had been detained—a clergyman's time is not always under his own control. Anne and Arthur were with him, but not Mrs. Ashton. He came in, ready with an apology for his tardiness, but found he need not offer it; neither Lord Hartledon nor his brother having yet appeared.

"Hartledon and that boy Carteret have not returned home yet," said the countess-dowager, in her fiercest tones, for she liked her dinner more than any other earthly thing, and could not brook being kept waiting for it. "And when they do come, they'll keep us another half-hour dressing."

"I beg your ladyship's pardon—they have come," interposed Captain Dawkes. "Carteret was going into his room as I came out of mine."

"Time they were," grumbled the dowager. "They were not in five minutes ago, for I sent to ask."

"Which of the two won the race?" inquired Lady Maude of Captain Dawkes.

"I don't think Carteret did," he replied, laughing. "He seemed as sulky as a bear, and growled out that there had been no race, for Hartledon had played him a trick."

"What did he mean?"

"Goodness knows."

"I hope Hartledon upset him," charitably interrupted the dowager. "A ducking would do that boy good; he is too forward by half."

There was more waiting. The countess-dowager flounced about in her pink satin gown; but it did not bring the loiterers any the sooner. Lady Maude—perverse still, but beautiful—talked in whispers to the hero of the day, Mr. Shute; wearing a blue-silk robe and a blue wreath in her hair. Anne, adhering to the colours of Lord Hartledon, though he had been defeated, was in a rich, glistening white silk, with natural flowers, red and purple, on its body, and the same in her hair. Her sweet face was sunny again, her eyes were sparkling: a word dropped by Dr. Ashton had given her a hope that, perhaps, Percival Elster might be forgiven sometime.

He was the first of the culprits to make his appearance. The dowager attacked him of course. What did he mean by keeping dinner waiting?

Val replied that he was late in coming home; he had been out. As to keeping dinner waiting, it seemed that Lord Hartledon was doing that: he didn't suppose they'd have waited for him.

He spoke tartly, as if not on good terms with himself or the world. Anne Ashton, near to whom he had drawn, looked up at him with a charming smile.

"Things may brighten, Percival," she softly breathed.

"It's to be hoped they will," gloomily returned Val. "They look dark enough just now."

"What have you done to your face?" she whispered.

"To my face? Nothing that I know of."

"The forehead is red, as if it had been bruised, or slightly grazed."

Val put his hand up to his forehead. "I did feel something when I washed just now," he remarked slowly, as though doubting whether anything was wrong or not. "It must have been done—when I—struck against that tree," he added, apparently taxing his recollection.

"How was that?"

"I was running in the dusk, and did not notice the branch of a tree in my way. It's nothing, Anne, and will soon go off."

Mr. Carteret came in, looking just as Val Elster had done—out of sorts. Questions were showered upon him as to the fate of the race; but the dowager's voice was heard above all.

"This is a pretty time to make your appearance, sir! Where's Lord Hartledon?"

"In his room, I suppose. Hartledon never came," he added in sulky tones, as he turned from her to the rest. "I rowed on, and on, thinking how nicely I was distancing him, and got down, the mischief knows where. Miles, nearly, I must have gone."

"But why did you pass the turning-point?" asked one.

"There was no turning-point," returned Mr. Carteret; "some confounded meddler must have unmoored the boat as soon as the first race was over, and I, like an idiot, rowed on, looking for it. All at once it came into my mind what a way I must have gone, and I turned and waited. And might have waited till now," he added, "for Hart never came."

"Then his arm must have failed him," exclaimed Captain Dawkes. "I thought it was all wrong."

"It wasn't right, for I soon shot past him," returned young Carteret. "But Hart knew the spot where the boat ought to have been, though I didn't; what he did, I suppose, was to clear round it just as though it had been there, and come in home again. It will be an awful shame if he takes an unfair advantage of it, and claims the race."

"Hartledon never took an unfair advantage in his life," spoke up Val Elster, in clear, decisive tones. "You need not be afraid, Carteret. I dare say his arm failed him."

"Well, he might have hallooed when he found it failing, and not have suffered me to row all that way for nothing," retorted young Carteret. "Not a trace could I see of him as I came back; he had hastened home, I expect, to shut himself up in his room with his damaged arm and foot."

"I'll see what he's doing there," said Val.

He went out; but returned immediately.

"We are all under a mistake," was his greeting. "Hartledon has not returned yet. His servant is in his room waiting for him."

"Then what do you mean by telling stories?" demanded the countess-dowager, turning sharply on Mr. Carteret.

"Good Heavens, ma'am! you need not begin upon me!" returned young Carteret. "I have told no stories. I said Hart let me go on, and never came on himself; if that's a story, I'll swallow Dawkes's skiff and the sculls too."

"You said he was in his room. You know you did."

"I said I supposed so. It's usual for a man to go there, I believe, to get ready for dinner," added young Carteret, always ripe for a wordy war, in his antipathy to the countess-dowager.

"*You* said he had come in;" and the angry woman faced round on Captain Dawkes. "You saw them going into their rooms, you said. Which was it—you did, or you didn't?"

"I did see Carteret make his appearance; and assumed that Lord Hartledon had gone on to his room," replied the captain, suppressing a laugh. "I am sorry to have misled your ladyship. I dare say Hart is about the house somewhere."

"Then why doesn't he appear?" stormed the dowager. "Pretty behaviour this, to keep us all waiting dinner. I shall tell him so. Val Elster, ring for Hedges."

Val rang the bell. "Has Lord Hartledon come in?" he asked, when the butler appeared.

"No, sir."

"And dinner's spoiling, isn't it, Hedges?" broke in the dowager.

"It won't be any the better for waiting, my lady."

"No. I must exercise my privilege and order it served. At once, Hedges, do you hear? If Hartledon grumbles, I shall tell him it serves him right."

"But where can Hartledon be?" cried Captain Dawkes.

"That's what I am wondering," said Val. "He can't be on the river all this time; Carteret would have seen him in coming home."

A strangely grave shade, looking almost like a prevision of evil, arose to Dr. Ashton's face. "I trust nothing has happened to him," he exclaimed. "Where did you part company with him, Mr. Carteret?"

"That's more than I can tell you, sir. You must have seen—at least—no, you were not there; but those looking on must have seen me get ahead of him within view of the starting-point; soon after that I lost sight of him. The river winds, you know; and of course I thought he was coming on behind me. Very daft of me, not to divine that the boat had been removed!"

"Do you think he passed the mill?"

"The mill?"

"That place where the river forms what might almost be called a miniature harbour. A mill is built there which the stream serves. You could not fail to see it."

"I remember now. Yes, I saw the mill. What of it?"

"Did Lord Hartledon pass it?"

"How should I know!" cried the boy. "I had lost sight of him ages before that."

"The current is extremely rapid there," observed Dr. Ashton. "If he found his arm failing, he might strike down to the mill and land there; and his ankle may be keeping him a prisoner."

"And that's what it is!" exclaimed Val.

They were crossing the hall to the dining-room. Without the slightest ceremony, the countess-dowager pushed herself foremost and advanced to the head of the table.

"I shall occupy this seat in my nephew's absence," said she. "Dr. Ashton, will you be so good as to take the foot? There's no one else."

"Nay, madam; though Lord Hartledon may not be here, Mr. Elster is."

She had actually forgotten Val; and would have liked to ignore him now that he was recalled to remembrance; but that might not be. As much contempt as could be expressed in her face was there, as she turned her snub nose and small round eyes defiantly upon that unoffending younger brother.

"I was going to request you to take it, sir," said Percival, in low tones, to Dr. Ashton. "I shall go off in the pony-carriage for Edward. He must think we are neglecting him."

"Very well. I hate these rowing matches," heartily added the Rector.

"What a curious old fish that parson must be!" ejaculated young Carteret to his next neighbour. "He says he doesn't like boating."

It happened to be Arthur Ashton, and the lad's brow lowered. "You are speaking of my father," he said. "But I'll tell you why he does not like it. He had a brother once, a good deal older than himself; they had no father, and Arthur—that was the elder—was very fond of him: there were only those two. He took him out in a boat one day, and there was an accident: the eldest was drowned, the little one saved. Do you wonder that my father has dreaded boating ever since? He seems to have the same sort of dread of it that a child who has been frightened by its nurse has of the dark."

"By Jove! that was a go, though!" was the sympathising comment of Mr. Carteret.

The doctor said grace, and dinner proceeded. It was not half over when Mr. Elster came in, in his light overcoat. Walking straight up to the table, he stood by it, his face wearing a blank, perplexed look. A momentary silence of expectation, and then many tongues spoke together.

"Where's your brother? Where's Lord Hartledon? Has he not come?"

"I don't know where he is," answered Val. "I was in hopes he had reached home before me, but I find he has not. I can't make it out at all."

"Did he land at the mill?" asked Dr. Ashton.

"Yes, he must have done so, for the skiff is moored there."

"Then he's all right," cried the doctor; and there was a strangely-marked sound of relief in his tones.

"Oh, he is all right," confidently asserted Percival. "The only question is, where he can be. The miller was out this afternoon, and left his place locked up; so that Hartledon could not get in, and had nothing for it but to start home with his lameness, or sit down on the bank until some one found him."

"He must have set off to walk."

"I should think so. But where has he walked to?" added Val. "I drove slowly home, looking on either side of the road, but could see nothing of him."

"What should bring him on the side of the road?" demanded the dowager. "Do you think he would turn tramp, and take his seat on a heap of stones? Where do you get your ideas from?"

"From common sense, ma'am. If he set out to walk, and his foot failed him half-way, there'd be nothing for it but to sit down and wait. But he is *not* on the road: that is the curious part of the business."

"Would he come the other way?"

"Hardly. It is so much further by the river than by the road."

"You may depend upon it that is what he has done," said Dr. Ashton. "He might think he should meet some of you that way, and get an arm to help him."

"I declare I never thought of that," exclaimed Val, his face brightening. "There he is, no doubt; perched somewhere between this and the mill, like patience on a monument, unable to put foot to the ground."

He turned away. Some of the men offered to accompany him: but he declined their help, and begged them to go on with their dinner, saying he would take sufficient servants with him, even though they had to carry Hartledon.

So Mr. Elster went, taking servants and lanterns; for in some parts of this road the trees overhung, and rendered it dark. But they could not find Lord Hartledon. They searched, and shouted, and waved their lanterns: all in vain. Very much perplexed indeed did Val Elster look when he got back again.

"Where in the world can he have gone to?" angrily questioned the countess-dowager; and she glared from her seat at the head of the table on the offender Val, as she asked it. "I must say all this is most unseemly, and Hartledon ought to be brought to his senses for causing it. I suppose he has taken himself off to a surgeon's."

It was possible, but unlikely, as none knew better than Val Elster. To get to the surgeon's he would have to pass his own house, and would be more likely to go in, and send for Mr. Hillary, than walk on with a disabled foot. Besides, if he had gone to the surgeon's, he would not stay there all this time. "I don't know what to do," said Percival Elster; and there was the same blank, perplexed look on his face that was observed the first time he came in. "I don't much like the appearance of things."

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