

James Ewing Ritchie

**Crying for the Light: or, Fifty
Years Ago. Volume 3 of 3**



James Ritchie
Crying for the Light: or, Fifty
Years Ago. Volume 3 of 3

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23148379
Crying for the Light; Or, Fifty Years Ago. Vol. 3 [of 3]:*

Содержание

CHAPTER XXII.	4
CHAPTER XXIII	26
CHAPTER XXIV	34
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	43

Ritchie J. Ewing James Ewing **Crying for the Light; Or,** **Fifty Years Ago. Vol. 3 [of 3]**

CHAPTER XXII. **AT THE CATTLE-SHOW**

Again we are at Sloville, on the occasion of the anniversary of the flourishing Agricultural Society of the county – an occasion which fills the town with rosy-faced, ruined British farmers; which blocks up all the leading streets with flocks and herds of oxen and sheep from a thousand hills, and which not a little astonishes and vexes the soul of the true-born son of the soil, as he contemplates new-fangled machinery of every variety and for every purpose; alarms him with ominous forebodings of a time when, Othello-like, he will find his occupation gone, and the rascally steam-engine doing the work, and taking the bread out of the mouth of an honest man. He thinks of Swing and sighs. That mysterious personage had a way of putting down threshing-machines which was satisfactory for a time; but, alas! steam is king, and it is vain to fight with him. It is steam quite as much as the wickedness of the landlord, incredible as it may

seem to the Radical politician, which has emptied the country and filled the town. It would be all right if steam would work off our surplus population. Alas! it does nothing of the kind, and each year the labourer finds himself of less account; nor can there be any change for the better till we get the people back on to the land, away from the crowded city with its ever-increasing drudgery and toil. Perhaps when they have settled Ireland our wise men of Gotham may look at home. There is plenty for them to do there. It is high time that we do something for our bold peasantry, once their country's pride.

It is a fine, bright, sparkling morning, one rare in England, but to be made the most of when it comes. There are no clouds in the sky, and there is scarce a breath of air to bring them down from the vasty deep above. Every hedgerow is bright with flowers, and musical with the song of birds. Overnight there was a shower, which laid the dust and added a touch of freshness to the emerald meadows. On every side ancient oaks and wide-reaching elms cast a grateful shade. What can be dearer than an English landscape on such a day? Even the thatched clay cottage, with its roses and honeysuckle, looks picturesque, and the brown cows suggest more than milk as they lie chewing the cud, apparently at peace with themselves and all below. Here and there amidst the trees is the red-brick manor-house, or the old-fashioned farmhouse, or the gray spire of the village church, where from time immemorial the tribes have repaired. Yesterday, it were, they were teaching there the Mass; now the

Mass is unsung, and we have the doctrines and Articles of the Church of England, which seem sadly at variance with one and another. To-morrow what shall we hear there? Who can say? Man and his opinions change only in our villages, the face of Nature remains the same. You travel all the world over, and you come back to your native village to find it ever the same, only a little smaller, that is all.

From the lodge of a neighbouring hall rides forth a cavalcade; Sir Watkin Strahan, well-mounted, is the leader of the party. A fair girl, the rich merchant's daughter, is by his side; on the other is the rich merchant himself. Behind them follows a groom in livery, perhaps the best rider of the lot. As they leave the gate the keeper hands Sir Watkin an ill-written epistle on a dirty piece of paper, which Sir Watkin indignantly tears to pieces without reading. 'If the contents are of importance,' he says to himself, 'they will come before him in a more legitimate manner.'

'Tis that old woman from the workhouse,' says the lodge-keeper to the groom, who gives a knowing smile in reply as he passes out. 'She's a good deal arter the maister,' she replies, 'but he's not one to take up with the likes of her. She's a cool one, at any rate.'

They are now on the turnpike which leads to Sloville, and hence to London itself. The crowd thickens as they near the town. The tenants on the estate are numerous, and Sir Watkin has a word for them all. He inquires after their families; as to the state of their oxen and asses; what kind of a season it has been with

them, and how the crops are getting on. The tenants are careful not to reply too cheerily. They are talking to their landlord, and he may put up the rent if they brag too much.

The London merchant is charmed. He has a lot more money than Sir Watkin, but it brings him no gratified courtesies either abroad or at home. He is suspicious even of his chief clerk. Everyone seems to look up to Sir Watkin. There is something in being a landowner, and the bearer of any kind of hereditary title.

‘Why,’ he asks himself, ‘does not the Queen make baronets of such as himself? Men who add to British wealth, who carry British commerce all over the world; without whom England would never have become mistress of the seas. Infinitely superior is the British merchant to the British landlord. Yet, how much we think of the one, how little of the other. Will it ever be so?’ he asks himself. Wise as he is, he fails to anticipate a time when circumstances shall break the power of the landlord, and the produce of Canada and America make the land an unsaleable commodity.

As a matter of theory nothing can be more ideally beautiful than the landed system under which England has become great and flourishing; nor was any other system possible at the time it became developed in our midst. The sovereign apportioned the land between his nobles as a reward for their devotion to his service. As they became strong, they acted as a check on the sovereign himself; as the middle class began to grow strong by commerce, they acted as a check on each, and king and noble

felt their importance and their power, and were ready to attach them to their side. It is to the credit of our aristocracy that they aimed to be the leaders of the people; that they did not sink into mere courtiers; that they were bold and hardy – ready to take their share in the fighting and adventure which became the necessity of our insular position. It is more to their credit that the relation between them and their tenants was pleasant and mutually advantageous. The great landlord was a power in the land, a centre of civilization, the friend of all within his sphere of influence. His sons served the State – in the army and navy and the Church. The farmer and the labourer had much in common; they worked side by side, ate at the same table, talked the same language, and were equally ready to do the will of their superiors. In time there grew up a different state of things; with that love of money which is the root of all evil, society became revolutionized – the landlord wanted higher rents; the farmer aspired to be a gentleman, and the poor labourer was deprived of his bit of common, of his sports and pastimes; his cottage was pulled down, and he had to end his days in the workhouse or in some city slum; and now Hodge has only the beer-shop or the Primitive Methodist chapel to look to for sympathy and friendship. The man of to-day is the man who makes money, no matter how.

At the time of which I write, the old tradition in favour of the landlord was still in force, and Sir Watkin was glad to show his City friends how all did him honour as they made their way

amidst the ever increasing throng on their way to the cattle-show.

And the young lady – what of her? Her bosom swells, and her eye sparkles with pride. Her only recollection of her grandfather is that of a feeble old man dressed in rusty black, dependent for his bread and cheese on his more vigorous and successful son.

Sir Watkin had a hall full of the portraits of his ancestors. Some had been great lawyers, some soldiers and sailors – all more or less connected with the State. And, then, what a monarch was a landlord in his domains, almost armed with the power of life and death! How much pleasanter the talk of such a man than of one who was in a counting-house all day, and whose favourite literature was to be found in the money articles of the *Times*! Should she become Lady Watkin? Certainly it would be very nice, if she could not manage to secure a lord. In default of the latter, she made herself very agreeable to her host, who was old enough to be her father, and who, if he was an Israelite, was not altogether without guile.

At length our illustrious friends reach Sloville, or rather the outskirts of the town, where the Agricultural Show is held. Here the sheep are inspected; and then they pass on to the shorthorns and Herefords; and then, very evident in more ways than one were the pigs of Berks and Hants, and other choice breeds. How they were watched by the fat farmers with sympathetic eyes! How the rustic chawbacon doted on them! We hear much of the roast beef of old England, but dearer to the national heart is its roast pork, especially when it comes to us in the shape of roast pig,

immortalized by the charming Elia, and the theme – the fitting theme – of one of his most eloquent essays: ‘See him,’ he writes, ‘in the dish – his second cradle – how meek he lieth! Wouldst thou have the innocent grow up to the grossness and indocility which too often accompany maturer swinehood? Ten to one he would have proved a glutton, a sloven, an obstinate, disagreeable animal wallowing in all manner of filthy conversation. From these sins he is happily snatched away.’

’Ere sin could blight or sorrow fade,
Death came with timely care.’

The horses, as the nobler animals, had a field to themselves. It was there the multitude flocked, for every Englishman thinks he knows more of horses and can manage them better than anyone else; all were there, from the Leviathan cart-horses, such as we see in brewers’ drays, to the light-built hack on which my lady canters across the park. Here Sir Watkin, as became him, was oracular, as he went from one to the other of the candidates for the honours of the day, looked into his mouth and inspected his teeth, felt his hoofs and prodded his sides, took off his hat and beat a tattoo with his riding-whip in order to get a good idea of the animal’s performance, whilst the ostler with a straw in his mouth stood admiring. The farmers were proud, for Sir Watkin was a connoisseur, and knew a thing or two.

Next to the horses, the ladies affected the poultry. Perhaps a

time will come when the British farmer will condescend to think of such small fry, and divert into his own pocket the millions we send to France and elsewhere for eggs and poultry. Sir Watkin did not care much about them – nor did the British merchant – so long as he got his fresh egg for breakfast, and his little bit of the breast with a glass of sherry for lunch; but the lady was not to be gainsaid, and so a half-hour was devoted to the noisy neighbourhood of Brahmas and Dorkings and Cochinchinas; while rival cocks – happily far apart – challenged each other to mortal combat, and proudly hurled defiance from the prison walls. A short distance off we the improved ploughs and tumbrels and waggons, and the reaping machines, for which we are indebted to America, and which testify how much may be done by machinery on large farms held by farmers of sufficient means. Here the spectators were of a more select class, high farming not being in everyone's way. Instead of the rosy, stupid, sleek bucolic, you saw men learned in machinery, and with some of the smartness of the town men, bent on improvement and eager to turn science to profitable account. Wheat was threshed and dressed in the most efficient manner. The rustic farmer stared, open-mouthed, questioning whether it were safer to continue as his fathers before him or to give in to machinery which promised him such beneficent results. As it was, he seemed to be much exercised in his mind. The elder men shook their heads, the young ones seemed ready for novelty. Perhaps the truth lay between the two. Had we not of late suffered much

from potato disease? said the old farmer, and did one ever hear of that before we had the railway? That was a poser, as they thought, which there was no getting over, however plausible the speech of agricultural implement maker or vendor of artificial manure.

As usual, the refreshment booths were the most patronized parts of the exhibition. There the learned and the ignorant, the old-fashioned farmer and the man of the present time, met on an equality. There was to be found the touch of nature which makes the whole world kin. The townspeople understood that part of the business as well as the farmer who had come out for a spree; and in a little while the fun was fast and furious.

The outskirts of the field devoted to the exhibition assumed the aspect of a fair. Here a crowd witnessed that popular domestic drama known as Punch and Judy. There the youths of the district played madly with Aunt Sally. In one quarter champions from London demonstrated the art of self-defence; in another was Mrs. Jarley with her moral wax-works. The peasantry were in great force, as they always are when beer is to be had or anything out of the way to be seen. So dense was the crowd it was a wonder someone was not hurt, as reckless farmers, under the influence of beer, and in order to show off the prowess of their steeds, galloped up and down. Boys, of course, were always in the way. Unfortunately a special providence watched over them.

All at once Sir Watkin Strahan found that he was followed by an old woman in a workhouse garb, who had got out for a holiday, and who had evidently been indulging in liquor to an extent that

embarrassed her movements and impaired her forces of speech. It was a very disagreeable situation for him. He was well known to everyone there, and, besides, he had a lady under his escort in whose eye he wished to assume a good figure. As a popular landlord and well-known county man, so far he had succeeded to his heart's content.

The swells had deferred to his opinion; the farmers had applauded his jokes, whilst their wives and daughters beamed with smiles; and the plebeians had eyed him with reverence from afar. Representatives of leading firms had besought his attention and patronage as they explained the peculiar merits of their own machines. His own part in the show had been very successful. He had won a prize with one of his own bullocks, his sheep were classed in A 1, and his fine porkers, of the real Berkshire breed, had attracted honourable mention; but wherever he went, there was this old hag in his way, making signs to him which he could not or would not understand. All at once he was separated from his friends, and the woman, seeing her opportunity, rushed at him.

‘What the deuce do you want?’ said he angrily, holding up his riding-whip as if about to hit her.

‘I’ve got something to say to yer honour.’

‘Well, say on,’ said he impatiently.

‘But I cant say it here,’ was the reply.

‘I suppose,’ said the Baronet, ‘you want some money? There is half a crown,’ continued he, hastily tossing it her. ‘But don’t spend

it in beer, my good woman; you have had too much already.'

'No, 'tis not money. I can tell yer honour something you would like to know.'

'Much obliged, I am sure; but I fear you are labouring under a delusion.'

'No, no, Sir Watkin.'

'You're drunk, I tell you. Be off, or I'll give you in charge.'

'Me drunk, Sir Watkin? A poor lone widow as has lived respectable in Sloville for years, though unfortunate, but that is neither here nor there. Me drunk? No, no, Sir Watkin!'

'But I tell you you are, my good woman.'

'Drunk or sober, Sir Watkin, you must listen to me.'

'I'll do nothing of the kind.'

'If you don't hear me, Sir Watkin, you'll be sorry as long as you live.'

By this time the crowd had been attracted to the spot, and the situation was becoming unpleasant to the Baronet, who formed the centre of an amazed group, to whom the annoyance of the Baronet and the tipsy gravity of the woman were more than slightly amusing.

Sir Watkin attempted to move off.

The poor woman endeavoured to stop him. In the attempt she overbalanced herself, and fell prostrate on the earth, to the intense delight of the spectators, who enjoyed the scene amazingly.

'Sir Watkin, I say,' said his persecutor, rising slowly from her

recumbent position; ‘Sir Watkin, I say!’

But the baronet was gone, and, instead, the woman found herself being assisted gently off the ground by an efficient policeman, who, seeing a crowd of a peaceful character, thought it becoming to interfere.

Had the crowd been of a different complexion, and had there been any fighting going on, the chances are the policeman – with the usual instinct of his order for a sound skin or an uncracked skull – would have been looking steadfastly in quite an opposite direction. They all do it, and it is natural.

The man had already asked Sir Watkin if he would have her given in charge, an offer Sir Watkin declined. He had no wish, he said, to be hard on her; he only wished her to leave him alone. That was quite enough.

The crowd naturally sided with the Baronet. He was the great man of the district.

‘What business had a wretched woman like that to interfere with him? Just like her imperence!’ said the majority.

One or two, more curious than the rest, followed the woman, with a view to learn further particulars; but she was, for a wonder, reticent. She was not Sall – but Sall’s friend and ally. Not if wild horses were to drag her in twain would she disclose her secret. It was one between Sir Watkin and herself alone.

Sir Watkin rejoined his friends, trusting that they had not been eye-witnesses of his adventure.

Just at that moment he had no wish to have scandal or mystery

attaching to his name. Hitherto, his appearance had been quite a success, and the British merchant and his daughter were duly impressed with the respect and attention he had everywhere commanded.

‘We’ve missed you much, Sir Watkin,’ said the lady in a tone which flattered his vanity and raised his hopes.

‘Yes, the crowd cruelly separated us for a few minutes.’

‘A few minutes!’ said the lady; ‘it seemed to me a long time.’

‘You make me proud,’ said the Baronet. ‘It is something to be missed by one who has always so many admirers.’

‘You flatter me, Sir Watkin. But, seriously, what was all the fuss about?’

‘Only a tipsy woman.’

‘How shocking! But, good gracious, there she is again.’

Sir Watkin looked in the direction pointed out, and, sure enough, there was his old enemy. Conducted off the ground by one gate, she had reappeared by another, and was bearing down, amidst the jeers of the *oi polloi*, straight upon himself.

‘Confound her impudence!’ he exclaimed. ‘I wish I had given her in charge.’

‘Sir Watkin, I say! Sir Watkin, hear me! I’ve something very particular to say.’

‘Yes, but you can’t say it now, my good woman. Don’t you see I am engaged?’

Again a crowd assembled in full expectation of some fun – an extra entertainment not included in the day’s programme.

Again, fortunately, the policeman appeared.

‘Now, my good woman,’ said he, ‘he hoff. Don’t you see you are creatin’ a disturbance?’

‘I am a-doin’ w’at?’ asked the party addressed.

‘You are a-creatin’ a disturbance and hinterferin’ with the gentry. It is agen the law. You’d best take yourself off.’

‘Oh, I am a-goin’, but I must speak to Sir Watkin first.’

‘Call at the Hall, old gal, and leave your card, and then Sir Watkin will be delighted to see you,’ cried one in the crowd. ‘The family dine at seven. Don’t forget the hour.’

‘Yes,’ said another, ‘Sir Watkin will be pleased to see such a beauty. He’ll want you to stop with him a month. Sir Watkin knows a pretty gal when he sees one – no one better.’

But by this time Sir Watkin and his party were off. His groom had come to the rescue and brought up the horses, and they remounted, leaving the tipsy woman to scream after him in vain.

This time, however, her blood was up, and she refused to be led quietly off. Another constable came to the rescue of his mate, and she was carried off, kicking and struggling all the while. Her cries filled the air and reached the Baronet’s party.

‘Tis very annoying, but one can’t help such things on a public day like this,’ said he in an apologetic tone to the lady. ‘The poor woman must be cracked, I think.’

‘It makes one ashamed of one’s sex,’ was her reply.

‘Such conduct ought not to be allowed. The police aren’t half sharp enough,’ said the British merchant. ‘What do we pay

rates and taxes for, I should like to know, but to prevent such disturbances?’

The British merchant evidently expected the British public to be as subdued and deferential as his clerks in his counting-house, when they appeared in his august and imposing presence, or as his debtors, when bills were overdue.

The ladies of his party had left the field early – their ears stunned with the noisy scene:

‘With the striking of clocks,
Cackle of hens, crowing of cocks,
Lowing of cow and bull and ox,
Bleating of pretty pastoral flocks.’

Sir Watkin and his friend, the British merchant, had stopped to dine at the grand banquet held on the occasion, in the leading hotel of the town. An Englishman can do nothing without a public dinner. Sir Watkin had to take the chair.

‘You will excuse me, won’t you?’ said he to the young lady, as he parted with her.

‘Oh, yes!’ said she gaily. ‘I am quite aware property has its duties as well as its rights.’

‘Well, I think it is well to be neighbourly when one has the chance. But I give you my word of honour, I would far sooner ride back with you.’

‘Well, the best of friends must part,’ said the lady. ‘But you will be home in good time. *Au revoir!* Pray, take care of papa.’

said the lady, as she returned to the carriage that was to take her and some other ladies to the Hall, under the care of the vicar of the parish.

Meanwhile, Sir Watkin made his way with his friend to the leading hotel of Sloville, where a heavy dinner of the old-fashioned type – such as was dear to the farmer years ago – was prepared, where the feeding and the drinking were alike trying to the stoutest nerve and the strongest digestion, and where the after-dinner oratory was of a truly bucolic character.

The farmers were delighted to find their landlord in the chair, and listened to him as if he were an oracle. The dinner was a great success. As chairman, the Baronet had especially distinguished himself.

There were fireworks in the evening, and a Bacchanalian orgy such as Sloville had rarely beheld. But the Baronet and his friend did not stop for that, but got back to the Hall in time to finish the day with a ball. The old Hall was gayer that night than it had been for a long time. All the old family plate had been brought forth for the occasion, and everywhere was light and music and laughter – and bright the lamps shone on

‘Fair women and brave men.’

The revelry was loud and long, and hours after the ladies had retired the men had remained in the smoking-room to drink soda and brandy, and to talk of hunting exploits, of horses, of women,

and of wine.

The shades of night had passed, and the golden dawn was glittering in the east. The sun was commencing like a giant refreshed to renew his daily course – the simile is old, but it is true, nevertheless. A slight mist – prelude of a hot day – dimmed the valley below the Hall, and marked the line of the little trout stream, where Sir Watkin had loved to fish when a boy. In the grand old trees around, the birds were commencing their morning song of praise, while the heavy rooks were preparing to take their usual flight in search of food. The pheasants were feeding in the surrounding park.

Not yet had man gone forth to his daily toil, and there was peaceful slumber in the trim cottage and the snug farmhouse alike. Now and then the shrill cry of the petted peacock awoke the woods, or the clamour of the early cock.

Sir Watkin lingered to enjoy the loveliness of the rural scene and the freshness of the morning air. For awhile something even of sentiment filled his heart. What had he done that all that lovely landscape should be his? How could he have lived as he had in London and Paris, in Vienna or Rome? Was it true that there was a God, as they told him in church, and as he had learned on his mother's knee – who had given him all these things richly to enjoy, and would demand, sooner or later, an account of his stewardship? Then he looked at the glass, and was shocked as he saw how bloodshot were his eyes, how dark the skin underneath; how clear were the lines marked by dissipation on his cheek and

brow.

Well, it was time he settled down. He had not behaved well to his first wife, he admitted, but that was no reason why he should not treat his second wife well. Then he was little better than a lad – now he was a man who had seen something of the world and who knew the value of peace and quietness. And so resolving, he dismissed his man and undressed.

Even then sleep was shy in coming. He had a puzzle to distract him to which he could find no answer. What had that old tipsy female at the cattle-show got to tell him? – what was the secret she pretended to have in her possession? Was the mystery ever to be solved? He had seen in her something to remind him of a girl who had once been in his service, but it could not be her. Surely she had not become what he saw. Sir Watkin forgot that the beauty of a woman, when she takes to drink and low company, is of a very evanescent character.

Sleep – Nature's restorer, balmy sleep – how hard it is to get when you want it! The morrow was to be an important day. It was to decide his fate. The fair guest had looked lovingly on him as she left the drawing-room. There was something in the way in which her hand lingered in his own that suggested to the Baronet hope. The worldly-minded father was, at any rate, safe, and was prepared to invest handsomely in a titled son-in-law. He, the latter, had been of late in a somewhat shady state; there were many whispers about him in society, and not to his credit. It was clear that in certain transactions, like other

young and foolish scions (considering how they are brought up it is almost impossible for them to be otherwise), he had suffered considerable pecuniary loss – or, in other words, been uncommonly well fleeced. Stately dames who ruled in Belgravia did not seem to him as genial as formerly; doors that were once opened freely were now closed. Low Radical newspapers occasionally hinted that he was no credit to the class who neither toil nor spin. It even began to dawn on the Baronet that his career had not been a brilliant one.

Half sleeping and half waking, there came to him unpleasant thoughts, and dreams equally so – of women whom he had betrayed, of friends who had trusted to him in vain, of splendid opportunities he had missed, of time and strength frittered away on trifles, or what was worse. He must yet be a power in the land – he would yet leave behind him a name – he would yet have the world at his feet. With a title and with money what cannot a man do in this land of ours? asked the Baronet of himself. Fellows of whom he thought nothing, whom he knew as inferiors at Eton or at College – poor, patient, spiritless plodders – had passed him in that battle of life which after all is only a Vanity Fair.

Such thoughts as these kept the Baronet wide awake, much to his disgust. It was the dinner, it was the wine, it was the cigar that kept him awake. Perhaps they did. But there was something else that did so, though the Baronet did not see it – the accusal of a conscience in which he did not believe, the workings of a divine law which he laughed at.

The next day no one was up early, and no one made his appearance at the breakfast-table save the elderly members of the party. Most of the gentlemen visitors overslept themselves, and the ladies were served in their own rooms. Then came the carriages and the departure of the guests – some to town, some to fashionable health resorts. Business required the presence of the great merchant in London, and he took his daughter with him. Sir Watkin managed to get down in time to see them off, and to promise to follow them next day. The lady left quite content; she knew what was to come, and what would be her reply.

Very dull and gloomy seemed the old house as the company one by one departed. Sir Watkin took up the morning papers – there was nothing in them; the society journals – he was better informed than their writers. No novel could interest him in his then state of mind. He had a headache; he would go for a ride, a sovereign remedy for such maladies as gentlemen in his station suffer from. Accordingly the horse was brought round, and he was in the saddle. He would be back before dark, and did not require his groom, and he trotted gaily away from the ancestral Hall under the ancestral oaks, along the gravelled drive through the park, feeling a little fresher for the effort. He would see his steward, and have a talk with him on business matters.

At the lodge-gate he stopped for a moment to order a general smartening up of that quarter. Alas! on the other side was an objectionable old woman, a friend who had before given him so much trouble. Sir Watkin's disgust was only equalled by his

anger. He was in no amiable mood, as the old woman clearly saw. She almost wished she had not come; she felt all of a tremble, as she said, as she asked him kindly to stop and hear what she had got to say. He muttered something very much unlike a blessing on his tormentor. He would have ridden over her had he not stopped his horse, which strongly opposed the idea of stopping. Could that old creature have any claim on him? The idea was ridiculous. And as to listening to her, why, that was quite out of the question for so fine a gentleman. She made an effort to clutch the rein. The high-spirited steed resented the indignity. In the scuffle the Baronet was unseated, and was taken up insensible.

‘Sure ’nough he’s dead as a stone,’ said the ploughman, who had first noticed him.

‘He’s nothing of the kind,’ said the gate-keeper, who was soon on the spot, ‘Get on the horse and ride to Sloville for the doctor,’ said he to the ploughman, while he and the other servants bore the body to the lodge-gate, where it was laid upon a bed.

The doctor came. ‘No bones broken,’ said he, after a cursory examination, ‘but a severe concussion of the brain. Draw down the blinds; put ice on his forehead; keep him quiet, and he may yet rally. In the meantime I will telegraph to London for the great surgeon, Sir Henry Johnson. If anybody can save him he can.’

The hours that day in that low lodge moved very slowly. No wife, no mother, no sister was there. The old mother had left that day for Scotland. Only one sister was alive, and she was with her husband in Italy; only the housekeeper from the Hall was

there to sit and watch and sigh, for she had known Sir Watkin from a baby, and was as proud of him as it behoved her to be, never believing any of the scandals connected with his name, and, indeed, scarcely hearing of them, for his wilder life was out of her sight and hearing. At home he was the model English gentleman, and then, again, when evil things were said of him, she refused to listen.

‘It was not her place,’ she said, ‘to hear bad spoken of any of the family of which she and hers generations before had been retainers.’

About mid-day came a telegram to say that the great Sir Henry was coming down, and that there was to be a carriage at the railway-station to meet him. In a couple of hours after came Sir Henry himself – a calm, dignified man of science, who lived in a world of which science is god, and was interested in humanity as a subject of dissection or operation. Apart from that, he had a poor opinion of human nature.

‘It is a bad case – very bad,’ said he to the country doctor, who had explained to him all the particulars of the accident. ‘It is a very bad case, but I think science is equal to the emergency. I suppose we must have an operation. I have brought my assistant with me, and my case of instruments. We’d better begin at once.’ Turning to look at the insensible patient, the great Sir Henry exclaimed: ‘I have come down for nothing; Sir Watkin is dead!’

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FUNERAL

‘Worldly people,’ wrote one of our greatest novelists, ‘never look so worldly as at a funeral.’ The truth of this was very apparent at the funeral of the deceased Baronet. There was the usual parade of outward grief at the churchyard, and in the town all the blinds were drawn down and the shops shut – with the exception of those set apart for the sale of beer and wine and spirits, which were rather better patronized than usual. It is said grief makes men thirsty. That certainly was the case at Sloville, for the usual toppers of the place had been increased in number by the addition of numerous thirsty souls from all the adjacent country, drawn together not so much by grief as by a pardonable curiosity.

Heavily tolled the bell of the old-fashioned church, in the gloomy vaults of which slept the family ancestors, whose varied virtues were recorded in marble in all parts of the building, and whose rotting carcasses poisoned the atmosphere of the place, and had done so for many generations.

When are we going to reform this and to cremate our dead, so that we may go to church in safety and with no fear of detriment to our physical well-being? The ancients burnt their dead. Is there any earthly reason why we moderns should not do the same? I

know none, except a stupid prejudice unworthy of a generation that loves to think itself enlightened, and that flatters itself it is wiser than any that has gone before. If it is to be talked of after death, surely the urn can be as fitting a remembrance of the departed as the costly and cumbrous marble monument, with its deception and untruth. ‘Five languages,’ writes Sir Thomas Brown, of Norwich, ‘secured not the epitaph of Gordianus. The man of God lives longer without a tomb than any by one visibly interred by angels, and adjudged to obscurity, though not without some marks directing human decency. Enoch and Elias, without either tomb or burial, in an anomalous state of being, are the great examples of perpetuity in their long and living memory, in strict account being still on this side death and having a late part yet to act upon the stage of earth.’ In vain is all earthly vanity, but there is no vanity so vain as that connected with the grave. ‘Yet man is a noble animal,’ as the same writer remarks, ‘splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave!’

And thus it was at the funeral of the deceased Baronet. All the clergy round had come to do him honour, and all the county families had come to put in an appearance – or, at any rate, sent their empty carriages to follow in the procession, which is supposed to be the same as attending one’s self. A fashionable undertaker from town had been retained for the occasion, and never did men wear so mournful an expression as he and his many men. I had almost written ‘merry’ men, for none were merrier when the dismal farce was over and they were back to town –

refreshed by stimulants, with which they had been plentifully supplied.

There was a great crowd in the church – a great crowd in the churchyard, and a great crowd all the way from the Hall. The heir, the deceased's brother, naturally came in for a good deal of criticism, and he was quite equal to the occasion – apparently mourning for the deceased as if he had loved him as much as everyone was aware he had done the reverse. Relatives from all parts were there, hoping against hope that they might find their names put down for something in the will. The tenantry made a decent show, for to many of them the deceased was a man after their own hearts – fond of sport, of racing, of good cheer, of fast living. All the world loves a gay spendthrift more than a sober and careful man who tries to live within his means and to save a little money. The enlightened British workman has, as a rule, an intense hatred for the capitalist, who is, after all, his best friend.

The peasantry were there in great force, glad to have a show of any kind to relieve the dull monotony of their lives – though feeling that it would make little difference to them who reigned at the Hall, and expecting little: as it had gone forth that the new Baronet was somewhat of a skinflint, and that little was to be expected from the mother and daughters who were in future to take up their residence at the old Hall. It is needless to add that the tradesmen of the town were present in great numbers. They knew on which side their bread was buttered. Tradesmen generally do. At any rate there was show enough and funereal pomp to give

occasion for the county paper of the following Saturday to devote considerable space to the affair, which – so the reporter wrote, with a touch of imagination which did him credit – had saddened the county and made everyone deplore the sudden and untimely decease of one of its most distinguished men.

The deceased Baronet had been the great man of the district – a leading magistrate, with power to ameliorate the condition of the poor – a power that he had never used. The workhouse was old and unhealthy, yet he had opposed every effort to build a better one; the relieving-officers were drunkards, and generally unable to keep their accounts correctly. The selection of such officers was, in fact, a job in order to make provision for some aged, feeble, drunken bankrupt, a boon companion of the farmers; nor were the medical officers much better. The outdoor paupers were victims of the grossest abuses. The aged were set to eke out their miserable existence by breaking stones on the road, and thus these poor creatures, half-clad, ill-fed, and suffering from rheumatism, had to work on the bleak roadside, exposed to the inclemency of the weather, till they ceased to be a parochial charge at all; and, as a rule, their homes were unfit for human habitation. The vagrants suffered from the grossest ill-usage. One quarter of the workhouse, ill or scarcely provided with bedding accommodation, was appropriated to a class consisting of honest seekers for work, tramps, vagabonds, and thieves of all ages, huddled indiscriminately together, using or listening to the vilest language, initiated in the mysteries of vice and crime, quarrelling

and fighting. There were no vagrant wards, and any attempt to introduce them was strenuously resisted, and thus, in spite of the Reformed Poor Law, as it was called, the state of the poor grew more wretched every day.

Sir Watkin knew all this. A word from him would have inaugurated a better state of things, but he never spoke that word. He was far too busy in his pursuit of pleasure to think of the poor on his estate, or to plead their cause, and the guardians were content to let things slide.

Dr. Chalmers maintained that the one main drawback to the effectual working of the new Poor Law would be the defective attendance at the boards of the landlords, and, as far as Sloville was concerned, the doctor was right. Had the deceased Baronet discharged the duties of his position, and concerned himself about the welfare of the poor, he might have been a blessing to the district. As it was, he was very much the reverse. In his time, as in that of the old Hebrew Psalmist, it might truly be said: 'The wicked in his pride doth persecute the poor.'

A few days and the astonishment of the town was over, and the sun was gay, and the earth as fair as ever. Nature takes no heed of death; it keeps on all the same its eternal way. The common people had their talk of old scandals, and the lodge-keeper became quite an oracle as he hinted at the appearance of an old woman at the gate, and expressed his wonder at what had become of her. He went so far as to hint at the possession of mysterious knowledge, of which the presumptive heir would

be glad to avail himself; but gradually even that form of mild excitement passed away. The public soon got over the event, as it generally does.

In the gay world, of which Sir Watkin had been a leading figure so recently, things went on much as usual. The old captain in the club, it is true, felt the loss of a man younger than himself, and on whom he had, to a certain extent, leaned. The manager of the Diamond Theatre was inconsolable, as his bills were many in the hands of the Jews, and he looked to the Baronet to take them up as they fell due. A little regret and wonder was expressed that the deceased Baronet did not cut up quite so well as was expected. Well, of course, he was a gentleman, and you can't expect a gentleman to be a good man of business. But a good many who lost by the deceased were not quite so easily consoled. It is pleasant to be able to pay twenty shillings in the pound, but that is not the whole duty of man, nevertheless. If Shakespeare had been unfortunate in business, if Milton had had to make an arrangement with his creditors, we should have thought just as well of them; nor does one think a penny the worse of De Foe, that he was in pecuniary difficulties, or of Dick Steele that he could not make both ends meet, or of Goldsmith that he left two thousand pounds of debt behind him. In the case of Sir Watkin Strahan the estate was strictly settled, and only his debts of honour got paid. As it was, there was little left for the new Baronet to start with.

And this state of things is the consequence of the law of

primogeniture, says the ignorant reformer. It is not so. Our laws of settlement are to be blamed as unfair and unjust. The main causes of agricultural depression, and of continued wrongdoing on the part of landed proprietors, are the laws which allow the owners to make deeds and wills which for many years, and often long after the owners' deaths, prevent the land from being sold, or the estate from being divided, no matter how expedient it may be that it should be sold, or no matter how foolish or extravagant the owner may be. Mr. Kay illustrates this in a case in which he had acted as trustee. This estate, about fifty or sixty years ago, came into the hands of a young nobleman, whom he calls Lord A., when he was twenty-one. He married when he was twenty-two, and the marriage-deed gave him only a life interest in the estate, and settled the property on his children. He had one child, and as soon as that child was twenty-one another deed was made, giving that child only a life interest in the estate, and settling it after his death on the children he might leave in succession. Lord A. was an extravagant and reckless man. He hunted the county; he kept open house; he lived as if his estate were ten times as great as it really was. He gambled and lost heavily. He raised money on his life interest. He finally fled from England deeply in debt, and lived abroad. The remainder of the life interest was sold to a Jew, who knew that he would lose all when Lord A. died, and found his only profit in thinning the woods. That state of things lasted forty years. The farmers had no leases or any security for expenditure. The Jew would not spend a penny, nor

would the gentleman who took the mansion, because he could not tell when he might be turned out; and the tenantry were prevented from doing fairly to the land or to themselves. There was no one to support the schools or the church, or to look after the labourers on the estate. The farm-buildings fell into decay; the land was not properly drained or cultivated; the plantations were injured, and the mansion was dilapidated. And all this vast extent of mischief was the result of the deeds which the law had allowed the lord and his heir to execute. Nor are such cases isolated. Nor is it possible to over-estimate the wretchedness and poverty they create in rural England. Perhaps, in time, Englishmen will demand the abolition of laws which entail such bitter wrong on the community at large.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HONEYMOON

At that very time – in autumn, when everyone is supposed to be out of town and blinds are drawn down in all Belgravia; when the moors of Scotland and the health resorts of our own highly-favoured land or of the Continent are crammed, and white-winged yachts, like sea-fowl or flakes of snow, bedeck the peaceful waters of the Solent, and sparkle as they shine along our summer seas – a small party might be seen drawing up at the registrar's office somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Strand. No one knew what was going on, and the single brougham at the door attracted little attention. The first to get out was our old friend Buxton, the medical man; then came Wentworth, a little gayer than usual. In another, which followed immediately, were Rose, looking lovelier than ever and perhaps a trifle more serious, and her mother, a quiet old lady, much given to garrulity when she had a chance, and to self-effacement when she found no one wanted to hear her. The poor old soul had no idea of being married at the registrar's. The business was a very simple one – merely to make a declaration before the officer appointed for that purpose that they were to be married, and to sign a declaration to that effect, which was duly witnessed ere it was sent away to be preserved among our national archives. This done and the

registrar's fee paid, they drove away as quietly as they came to the Midland Railway Station in the Euston Road, where they had a pleasant lunch; and thence the newly-married couple took the train to the busy city of Liverpool, ever overflowing with a very migratory population. Here to-day, gone to-morrow. Of course they did not stop there long. The next day they left the dark cloud of Liverpool smoke behind for the romantic Isle of Man.

One of the first things they did was to take a trip round the island, and we will accompany them. For this purpose we step on board the *King Orrey*, as she lies at the Douglas Pier. King Orrey was one of the far-famed Monarchs of the Isle, and is now commemorated in a way of which he could have no idea.

We are off in good time, and as the day is tempting we have rather a numerous company on board, and no wonder, for it is not every day that you can see England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales in the course of a few hours. The legendary history of the Isle of Man at any rate matches that of any of the countries above-named. It is true the scepticism of modern times has dealt hardly with them. No Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, was imprisoned in the old Castle of Peel; no St. Patrick ever resided there, or even ever stepped from Peel to Ireland to Christianize the people there. It is also affirmed, and the candid student who sees the Ireland of to-day must admit there is a good deal in the affirmation, that if St Patrick ever did take that wonderful step, at any rate he was not very successful as regards the main object of his trip. Few people now believe that when the Manx men were

fighting the ancient Britons on the other side of the water, St. German raised such a hallelujah as to make the ancient Britons run away. In the same way modern unbelief suspects the story of the Giant who had three legs, and was the terror of the land, or of that floating island which rises in Soderick Bay every seven years, and then remains on the surface thirty minutes, no one yet having had the courage to place a Bible on any part of it, lest in any case of failure the enchanter might cast his club over Mona also. Likewise we may scorn the legend which tells us how St. Trisman's is left incomplete on account of the malice of an evil spirit, who, for want of better employment, amused himself by throwing down the roof every time it was put on, accompanying his achievement with a loud fiendish laugh of satisfaction. As well we might credit the Fenella of 'Peveril of the Peak' as a living reality, and not a wild conception of Sir Walter Scott's busy brain. Indeed, if the tourist to that lovely health resort – lovely I call it, in spite of the holiday-makers and tourists, mostly denominated Lancashire Cotton Balls – believes all he hears, the chances are that he becomes, to quote Sir Walter —

'Speechless, ghastly, wan,
Like him of whom the story ran,
That spake the spectre hound in Man.'

But the captain cries, 'Go ahead,' the last bell rings, and we are off. Apparently it is anticipated that our wants will be numerous. We are expected not to venture to sea without a good supply

of 'all round the island sweets;' ragged urchins offer us lucifer matches, aged females freshly-gathered fruits, and apparently it is presumed we cannot enjoy the day without purchasing a guide to the island, or photographs of the principal attractions. Of course the musicians are on board long before we are, as well as a poor fellow who is expected to keep the company on the broad grin all the trip by means of his songs and chaff.

'Poor fellow, I pity thee somewhat, in spite of thy sons and grandsons. Thy sow, with a litter of eight "poops,"' as he calls them; 'thy readiness to liquor up and spout nonsense. You're not such a fool as you look, however, and that is a consolation.'

Mountebanks, whether in Church and State, in business, or on the deck of an excursion steamer, generally manage to make their nonsense pay, often better than other men their sense.

'Rose,' says Wentworth, 'let us watch the beauty of Douglas as we steam out of the Bay. In a little while we shall see Snaefell, monarch of Manx mountains. We shall pass the little glen which leads to Laxey, with that wonderful wheel of which we hear so much, and then we are in Ramsey. Leaving Ramsey for the Point of Ayr, a lighthouse familiar to the traders between Barrow and Belfast, we shall note how the aspect of the land is changed, and that a sandy shore has taken the place of the rocks, which, looking across the water, seem to set England and Scotland at defiance. In a little while we shall be off Peel, with its ancient Castle and its hardy fishermen. The further we go, the bolder becomes the scenery. There we shall see a cavern which no one yet has had

the courage to explore, but which our captain will tell us leads to Port St. Mary. Then the steam-pipe whistles, and the rocks re-echo the whistle as we float along. Then we come to cliffs white with sea-gulls, who, startled by our approach, flap their heavy wings and fly like snowflakes. As we come to the Calf of Man the picturesqueness of the scene is increased tenfold as the rocks in their wildness guard their native shores. Fain would we linger, but our steamer urges on her wild career, and we must needs go with her. All we can do is to admire from a distance the rough and rugged coast, with its tiny bay, where the swimmer might enjoy his pastime, only disturbed, it may be, by a merman bold, or a mermaid a little bolder, as is the habit of the female, or by a glimpse of the great sea-serpent, which assuredly is to be found, if anywhere, haunting these azure waters, and then we are back in Douglas in time for dinner.'

'Yes, I know,' said the lady, laughing. 'The dinner you will be thinking of all the while.'

'How unkind of you to say so. We shall have a quarrel if you talk like that.'

'Is it not time?' said Rose, as she turned to him a look more bewitching than she had ever cast upon the buckram hero of the stage.

'Perhaps so. We have been married a week.'

'Good gracious!' said the lady archly; 'only a week! I thought it had been much longer.'

'I am sure you did nothing of the kind. There, I've caught you

telling stories already.’

‘But you know we did not get married according to ordinary notions of propriety. We did not go to a fashionable church. We had no fashionable people to see us made one, and there were none to wish us God-speed as we took the cab to the Midland Railway *en route* for Liverpool. So what can you expect?’

‘And worst of all,’ said Wentworth, laughing, ‘we got married —’

‘At the registrar’s office,’ said Rose, shrugging up her shoulders and making a face with a sad expression of horror, adding, after an interval: ‘And I don’t believe anyone knows it yet.’

‘So much the better. What has the world got to do with our private affairs? What to us is the world or the world’s laws?’

‘Upon my word, Wentworth, you are talking as improperly as ever.’

‘Yes. I fear I’ve got that bad habit, and I don’t expect I shall ever get rid of it as long as I live. You and I can talk plainly. We need not try to humbug each other. It is little we have to trouble ourselves about Mrs. Grundy. The law has bound us together, but we are bound together by something stronger than the law, I hope.’

‘Hope, Wentworth, is not the word. You know it,’ said Rose, as she lovingly looked into his somewhat grave and worn face.

On board the steamer thus the newly-married couple talked. Marriages are of many kinds. For some we have to thank God,

for others, alas! the devil.

Referring to his marriage, William Hutton, the far-famed Birmingham historian, writes: 'I never courted her, nor she me, yet we, by the close union with which we were cemented, were travelling towards the temple of Hymen without conversing upon the subject. Such is the happy effect of reciprocal love.' This reciprocal love generally leads to matrimony, and thus it was Rose and Wentworth had married. A good deal is to be said against the institution. Matrimony is not always a bed of roses. If the roses are there, they are often furnished with an intolerable supply of thorns. There can be no doubt of the fact that in many cases matrimony has led to an immense amount of misery. It has kept in chains men and women who had been better apart. It has made for them life dull, blank, sunless, joyless, a thing only to terminate with death. It is hard that men and women thus illuminated are not permitted to burst their fetters and be free. Take, for instance, the case of Mehetabel Wesley, the younger sister of the celebrated founder of Wesleyanism. Her heart was sensitive and full of love. We know what the mother of the Wesleys was – a stern, hard woman, whose first duty as a mother, according to her own statement, was to break the wills of her children. The father left his wife's bed because, when he prayed for King William, she would not say amen. None of the girls seemed to have married happily, but this, the youngest and fairest of them all, had a Benjamin's mess of misery. Her father compelled her to suffer the brutality of a marriage with a low wretch utterly unfit

to be her lord and master. Was not her marriage an immorality? Was it not a shame that society should have compelled her to live with such a man? – so much so ‘that her only hope,’ as she told a friend, was death, ‘because we Methodists always die in transports of joy.’ But what do men and women know of each other, as a rule, before marriage? Very little, indeed. Hence so much of the wretchedness of the wife, of the immorality of the man. I fear that it is the married men who chiefly sustain and create the vices of our great cities. Hence the bitter cry of him – our chief poet – the stern Puritan, who wrote in strains that can never die —

‘Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world and all our woe,’

on man’s behalf. Hence the earnestness with which he pleaded for relief to him who finds himself bound fast ‘to an image of earth, with whom he looked to be the co-partner of a sweet and pleasant society.’ However, Milton is practically not so much an advocate for divorce as is generally supposed. It is well known that he took his wife back, and they lived happily together till her death. There is generally a *modus vivendi*, unless the husband and wife be altogether foolish. Neither man nor woman in the long run can withstand true love, and it is hard to break a tie which once seemed desirable, and which is easily made bearable, especially when the young ones come and play around the hearth.

Fathers and mothers find it hard to leave their offspring, even if in the commerce of life they have found each other out. The children bring with them the old atmosphere of tenderness and love.

Returning to Douglas, Wentworth found a telegram to the effect that Sir Watkin Strahan had suddenly died of apoplexy.

‘Not very surprising,’ said Wentworth.

Sir Watkin belonged to the past in that respect rather than the present – to the age of port wine drinkers, when men got real port wine, and did not seem to be much the worse for it. The light wines of France had little charm for him, and soda-water and seltzer were equally obnoxious. His medical man had warned him, but Sir Watkin laughed at his warnings. He came of a long-lived family. His father and his grandfather had alike far exceeded their threescore years and ten when they were gathered to their fathers, and Sir Watkin argued that so it would be with him, a blunder which nearly cost him his life.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.