Reid Mayne

The Finger of Fate: A Romance

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Содержание

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Chapter One
The Half-Brothers

In a wood, within ten miles of Windsor, two youths are seen, gun in hand, in pursuit of game. A brace of thoroughbred setters, guarding the cover in front, and a well-equipped keeper, walking obsequiously in the rear, precludes any suspicion of poaching; though the personal appearance of the young sportsmen needs no such testimony.

The wood is only an extensive pheasant-cover, and their father is its owner. They are the sons of General Harding, an old Indian officer, who, with a hundred thousand pounds, garnered during twenty years' active service in the East, has purchased an estate in the pleasant shire of Bucks, in the hope of restoring health to a constitution impaired upon the hot plains of Hindostan.

A fine old Elizabethan mansion, of red brick, now and then visible through the openings of the cover, tells that the General has laid out his lacs with considerable taste, while five hundred

acres of finely timbered park, a "home farm," and half-a-dozen others rented out – to say nothing of the wood-covers and cottage tenements – prove that the *ci-devant* soldier has not carefully collected a hundred thousand pounds in India to be carelessly squandered in England.

The two young sportsmen, already introduced as his sons, are his only sons; in short, the only members of his family, with the exception of a maiden sister, who, being sixty years old, and otherwise extremely uninteresting, will not figure conspicuously in our tale, however true it is.

Looking at the two youths, as they step through the pheasant-cover, you perceive there is but slight difference in their size; there is in their age, and still more in their personal appearance. Both are what is termed *dark*; but there is a difference in the degree. He who is the elder, and who bears the baptismal name Nigel, has a complexion almost olive, with straight black hair, that under the sunlight exhibits a purplish iridescence.

Henry, the younger, with fair skin and ruddier cheek, has hair of an auburn brown, drooping down his neck like clusters of Spanish chestnuts.

So great is their dissimilarity in personal appearance, that a stranger would scarce believe the two young sportsmen to be brothers.

Nor are they so in the exact signification of the word. Both can call General Harding father; but if the word "mother" be mentioned, their thoughts would go to two different personages,

neither any longer on the earth. Nigel's should stray back to Hyderabad, to a tomb in the environs of that ancient Indian city; Henry's to a grave of later date, in the quiet precinct of an English country churchyard.

The explanation is easy. General Harding is not the only man, soldier or civilian, who has twice submitted his neck to the matrimonial yoke, though few ever wedded two wives so different in character as were his. Physically, mentally, morally, the Hindoo lady of Hyderabad was as unlike her Saxon successor as India is to England.

Looking at Nigel Harding and his half-brother, Henry, one could not help perceiving that the dissimilarity had in both cases been transmitted from mother to son, without any great distraction caused by the blood of a common father. An incident, occurring in the cover, gives evidence of this.

Though especially a pheasant preserve, the young sportsmen are not in pursuit of the bird with strong whirring wings. The setters search for smaller game. It is mid-winter. A week ago the youths might have been seen, capped and gowned, loitering along the aisles of Oriel College, Oxford. Now home for the holidays, what better than beating the home-covers? The frost-bound earth forbids indulgence in the grand chase; but it gives rare sport by driving the snipes and woodcocks – both migratory birds among the Chilterns – to the open waters of the running rivulet.

Up the banks of one – a brook that, defying the frost, gurgles musically among the trees – the young sportsmen are directing

their search. This, with the setters, tells that woodcock is their game. There are two dogs, a white and a black, both of good breed, but not equally well trained. The black sets steady as a rock; the white quarters more wildly, runs rash, and has twice *flushed* the game, without *setting* it.

The white dog belongs to Nigel; the black to his half-brother.

A third time the setter shows his imperfect training, by flushing a cock before the sportsmen are nigh enough to obtain a fair shot.

The blood sprung from Hyderabad can stand it no longer. It is hot even under the shadows of a winter wood in the Chilterns.

"I'll teach the cur a lesson!" cries Nigel, leaning his gun against a tree, and taking a clasp-knife out of his pocket. "What you should have taught him long ago, Doggy Dick, if you'd half done your duty."

"Lor, Muster Nigel," replies the gamekeeper, to whom the apostrophe has been addressed, "I've whipped the animal till my arms ached. 'Tain't no use. The steady ain't in him."

"I'll put it into him, then!" cries the young Anglo-Indian, striding, knife in hand, towards the spaniel. "See if I don't!"

"Stay, Nigel!" interposed Henry. "You are surely not going to do the dog an injury?"

"And what is it to you, if I am? He is *mine*– not *yours*."

"Only, that I should think it very cruel of you. The fault may not be his, poor dumb brute. As you say, it may be Dick who is to blame, for not properly training him."

"Thank'ee, Muster Henry! 'Bleeged to ye for yer compliment. In coorse it be all my doin'; tho' not much thanks for doin' my best. Howsoever, I'm obleeged to ye, Muster Henry."

Doggy Dick, who, though young, is neither graceful nor good-looking, accompanies his rejoinder with a glance that bespeaks a mind still more ungraceful than his person.

"Bother your talk – both!" vociferates the impatient Nigel. "I'm going to chastise the cur as he deserves, and not as you may like it, Master Hal. I want a twig for him."

The twig, when cut from its parent stem, turns out to be a stick, three-quarters of an inch in diameter.

With this the peccant animal is brutally belaboured, till the woods for a mile around re-echo its howlings.

Henry begs his brother to desist.

In vain. Nigel continues the cudgelling.

"Gi'e it him!" cries the unfeeling keeper. "Do the beggar good."

"You, Dick," interposes Henry, "I shall report you to my father."

An angry exclamation from the half-brother, and a sullen scowl from the savage in gaiters, is the only notice taken of Henry's threat. Nigel, irritated by it, only strikes more spitefully.

"Shame, Nigel! Shame! You've beaten the poor brute enough – more than enough. Have done!"

"Not till I've given him a mark to remember me!"

"What are you going to do to him? What more?" hurriedly

asks Henry, seeing that Nigel has flung away the stick, and stands threateningly with his knife. "Surely you don't intend – "

"To split his ear! That is what I intend doing!"

"For shame! You shall not!"

"Shall not? But I shall, and will!"

"You shall split my hand first!" cries the humane youth, flinging himself on his knees, and with both hands covering the head of the setter.

"Hands off, Henry! The dog is my own; I shall do what I please to him. Hands off, I say!"

"I won't!"

"Then take the consequences."

With his left hand Nigel clutches at the animal's ear, at the same time lunging out recklessly with the knife blade. Blood spurts up into the faces of both, and falls in crimson spray over the flax-like coat of the setter.

It is not the blood of Nigel's dog, but his brother's – the little finger of whose left hand shows a deep, longitudinal cut traversing all the way from knuckle to nail.

"You see what you've got by your interference!" cries Nigel, without the slightest show of regret. "Next time you'll keep your claws out of harm's way."

The unfeeling observation, more than the hurt received, at length stirs the Saxon blood of the younger brother.

"Coward!" he cries. "Throw your knife away, and stand up. Though you *are* three years older than I, I don't fear you. You

shall pay for this."

Nigel, maddened by the challenge from one whom he has hitherto controlled, drops the knife; and the half-brothers close in a fisticuff, fight with anger as intense as if no kindred blood ran in their veins.

As already stated, there is but slight difference in their size. Nigel the taller, Henry of stouter build. But in this sort of encounter the Saxon sinews soon show their superiority over the more flaccid frame of the Anglo-Indian; and in ten minutes' time the latter appears but too well pleased, when the keeper interferes to prevent his further punishment. Had it gone the other way, Doggy Dick would have allowed the combat to continue.

There is no thought of further sport. For that day, the woodcocks are permitted to remain undisturbed in their shrubby cover.

Henry, binding up his wounded hand in a kerchief, strides direct homewards, followed by the black setter. Nigel stalks moodily behind, with Doggy Dick by his side, and the blood-besprinkled animal skulking cowed-like at his heels.

General Harding is astonished at the early return of the sportsmen. Is the stream frozen up, and the woodcocks gone to more open quarters?

The blood-stained kerchief comes under his eye, and the split finger requires explanation. So, too, a purple ring around the eye of his eldest born. The truth has to be told, each giving his version.

The younger brother is at a disadvantage: for the testimony is two to one – the keeper declaring against him. For all that, truth triumphs in the mind of the astute old soldier, and although both his sons are severely reprimanded, Nigel receives the heavier share of the censure.

It is a sad day's sport for all – the black setter alone excepted.

For Doggy Dick does not escape unscathed. Ere parting from the presence of the General, the licence is taken from his pocket; the velveteen shooting jacket stripped from his shoulders; and he receives his discharge, with a caution never to show himself again in the Beechwood preserves, under the penalty of being treated as a poacher.

Chapter Two
Doggy Dick

Doggy Dick, on being discharged by General Harding, in a short time succeeded in obtaining another and similar situation. It was on an estate bordering that of the General, whose cover came within a field or two of meeting with those of his neighbour. This gentleman was a city magnate, by name Whibley, who, having accumulated a fortune by sharp trading on the Stock Exchange, had purchased the estate in question, and commenced playing squire on an extensive scale.

Between the old officer and the newcomer there was no cordiality; on the contrary, some coolness. General Harding had an instinctive contempt for the vulgar ostentation usually exhibited by these social upstarts, who must needs ride to the parish church in a carriage and pair, though their residence be but three hundred yards from the churchyard gate. Of this class was the gentleman in question.

In addition to the dissimilarity of tastes between a retired officer and a retired stockbroker, a dispute had early occurred between them, about rights of game belonging to a strip of waste that stretched triangularly between their respective properties.

It was a trifling affair, but well calculated to increase their mutual coolness; which at length ended in a hostility – silent, but

understood. To this, perhaps, more than any professional merit, was Doggy Dick indebted for his promotion to be head keeper of the Whibley preserves; just the course which a *parvenu* would take for the satisfaction of his spite.

On that same year, when the shooting season came round, the young Hardings discovered a scarcity of game in their father's preserves. The General did not often go gunning himself, and would not have noticed this falling off; neither, perhaps, would Nigel; but Henry, who was passionately fond of field sports, at once perceived that there was a thinner stock of pheasants than on the preceding season. All the more surprising to him, because it was a good year for game generally, and pheasants in particular. The Whibley covers were swarming with them; and they were reported plentiful in the country around.

It became a question whether General Harding's gamekeeper had properly attended to his trust. No poaching had been reported, except some trifling cases of boys, who had been detected stealing eggs in the hatching season. But this had not occurred on a scale sufficient to account for the scarcity of the game.

Besides, the new gamekeeper, who was reported one of the best, had been provided with a fall set of watchers; and, on the Whibley side, there was a staff not so strong, with Doggy Dick at their head.

While reflecting on this, it occurred to Mr Henry Harding that something might have been done to attract the pheasants across

to the Whibley covers. Perhaps a better lay of feed had been there provided for them?

He knew that neither Doggy Dick nor his master owed any good-will towards him or his father; and a trick of this kind would be compatible with the character of the stockbroker.

Still, there was nothing in it – beyond a certain discourtesy; and it only made it necessary that some steps should be taken to create a counter attraction for the game. Patches of buck wheat were sown here and there, and other favourite pheasant's food was liberally laid through the covers.

On the following season the result was the same, or worse – the strong, whirring wing was sparingly heard among the Harding preserves. Even partridges had become scarce in the Swedes and stubble; while on the Whibley property both were in abundance.

The General's gamekeeper, when taken to task, admitted that, during the breeding season, he had found several pheasants' nests rifled of their eggs. He could not account for it. There was no one ever seen in the covers, except occasionally the keepers from the neighbouring estate. But of course *they* would not do such a thing as steal eggs.

"Indeed," thought Henry Harding, "I'm not so sure of that. On the contrary, it appears to be the only way to account for our scarcity of game."

He communicated these thoughts to his father; and Whibley's keepers were forbidden the range. It was deemed discourteous, and widened the breach between the *ci-devant* soldier and the

retired stockbroker.

Another breeding season came round, and the young Hardings were at home for the Easter holidays. It was at this time of the year that the chief damage appeared to have been done to the game on the estate.

No amount of winter poaching can cause such havoc in a preserve, as that arising from the destruction, or abstraction, of the eggs. A farmer's boy may do greater damage in one day than the most incorrigible gang of poachers in a month, with all their nets, traps, guns, and other appliances to boot.

Knowing this, the Harding covers were this year still more carefully watched – additional men being employed. A goodly number of nests was noted, and a better produce expected.

But although the future seemed fair, Henry Harding was not satisfied with the past. He chafed at his disappointment on the two preceding seasons, and was determined on discovering the cause. For this purpose he adopted an expedient.

On a certain day a holiday was given to the keepers on the Harding estate, which included the watchers as well. It was fixed for the date of some races, held about ten miles off. The General's drag was granted for taking them to the race-course. The holiday was promised a week in advance; so that the fact might become known to the keepers of the adjoining estate.

The race day came; the drag rattled off, loaded with half a score of men in coats of velveteen. They were the keepers and watchers. For that day the Harding preserves were left to take

care of themselves – a fine opportunity for poachers.

So a stranger might have thought, but not Henry Harding. Just before the drag drove off, he was seen to enter the covers, carrying a Malacca cane, and take his way towards their farther side, where they were bounded by the estate of the stockbroker. He walked quietly, almost stealthily, through the copses. A poacher could not have proceeded with greater caution. Between the two preserves there was a strip of common land – the waste already alluded to as having caused contention. Near its edge stood an ancient elm, swathed in ivy. In its first fork, amidst the green festoons, Henry Harding ensconced himself; took a cigar out of his case; lit it; and commenced smoking.

The position he had chosen was excellent for his purpose. On one side it commanded a view of the waste. No one could cross from Whibley to Harding without being seen. On the other, it overlooked a broad expanse of the Harding covers – known to be a favourite haunt of pheasants, and one of their noted places of nesting.

The watcher kept his perch for a considerable time, without discovering anything to reward him for his vigilance. He smoked one cigar, then another, and was half-way through the third. His patience was becoming exhausted, to say nothing of the irksomeness of his seat on the corrugated elm. He began to think that his suspicions – hitherto directed against Doggy Dick – were without foundation. He even reasoned about their injustice. After all, Doggy might not be so bad as he had deemed him.

Speak of the fiend, and he is near; think of him, and he is not far off. So was it in the case of Doggy Dick. As the stump of Henry's third cigar was burnt within an inch of his teeth, Whibley's head keeper hove in sight. He was first seen standing on the edge of the Whibley cover, his ill-favoured face protruding stealthily through a screen of "witheys." In this position he stood for some time, reconnoitring the ground. Then, stepping out, silent and cat-like, he made his way across the neutral territory, and plunged into the Harding preserves.

Henry scanned him with the eye of a lynx, or detective. There was now the prospect of something to reward him for his long watching, and the strain of sitting upon the elm.

As was expected, Doggy took his way across the open expanse, where several nests had been "noted." He still kept to his cat-like tread – crouching, and now and then looking suspiciously around him.

This did not hinder him from flushing a pheasant. One rose with a sonorous whirr; while another went fluttering along the sward as if both its wings had been broken.

The hen looked as if Doggy might have covered her with his hat, or killed her with a stick. He did not attempt to do either; but, bending over the forsaken nest, he took out the eggs, and carefully deposited them in his game-bag!

Out of the same bag he took something, which Henry saw him scatter over the ground in the neighbourhood of the nest. This done, he walked on in search of another.

"Come," thought Henry, "one brood is enough to be sacrificed in this sort of way – enough for my purpose."

Throwing away the stump of his cigar, he dropped down from the tree, and rushed after the nest-robber.

Doggy saw him, and attempted to escape to the Whibley covers. But before he could cross the fence, the fingers of his pursuer were tightly clutched upon the collar of his velveteen coat; and he came to the ground, crushing the eggs within his game-bag. This being turned inside out, the spilt yolks and shattered shells gave proof of the plunder he had committed.

Henry Harding was at this time a strapping youth, with strength and spirit inherited from his soldier father. Moreover, he was acting with right on his side.

The keeper had neither his weight nor his inches, and was further enfeebled by his sense of wrong-doing. Under these circumstances, he saw the absurdity of making resistance. He made none; but permitted the irate youth to cudgel him with the Malacca cane until every bone in his body seemed about to be shattered like the egg-shells late carried in his game-bag.

"Now, you thief!" cried young Harding, when his passion was nearly spent. "You can go back to Mr Whibley's covers, and hatch whatever plot may suit you and your snob of a master, but no more of my pheasants' eggs."

Doggy did not dare to make reply, lest it should tempt a fresh application of the cudgel. Clambering over the fence, he hobbled back across the common, and hid himself among the hazels of

the Whibley preserves.

Turning towards the plundered nest, Henry Harding examined the ground in its proximity. He discovered a scattering of buckwheat, that had been steeped in some sweet-smelling liquid. It was the same he had seen Doggy distribute over the sward.

He collected a quantity in his kerchief, and carried it home. On analysis it proved to be poison!

Though there was no trial instituted, the story, with all its details, soon became known in the neighbourhood. Doggy Dick knew better than to bring an action for assault; and the Hardings were satisfied with the punishment that had been already administered to their disgraced keeper.

As for the retired stockbroker, he had no alternative but discharge his ill-conditioned servant, who from that time became notorious as the most adroit poacher in the parish.

The submissiveness with which he had received the castigation administered by Henry Harding seemed afterwards to have been a source of regret to him: for in future encounters of a similar kind he proved himself a desperate and dangerous assailant – so dangerous that, in a conflict with one of General Harding's watchers, occurring about a year from that time, he inflicted a severe wound upon the man, resulting in his death. He saved his own neck from the halter by making his escape out of the country; and though traced to Boulogne, and thence to Marseilles – in the company of some jockeys who were taking English horses to Italy – he finally eluded justice by hiding himself in

some corner of that classic land, then covered by a network of petty states; most of them not only obstructive to justice, but corrupt in their administration.

Chapter Three
The Archery Fête

Three years had elapsed, and the half-brothers were again home from college. They had both passed beyond the boundaries of boyhood. Nigel was of age, and Henry full grown.

Nigel had become noted for sedateness of conduct, economy in expenditure, and close application to his studies.

Henry, on the other hand, had won a very different character. If not considered an absolute scapegrace, he was looted upon as a young gentleman of somewhat loose habits, – hating books, loving all sorts of jollity, and scorning economy, as if, instead of a virtue, it were the curse of life.

In reality, Nigel was only restrained by an astute, secretive, and selfish, nature; while Henry, with a heart of more generous inclinings, gave way to the seductions of pleasure, with a freedom that would be tempered by time. The General, however satisfied with the conduct of his elder son, was not pleased with the proclivities of the younger; more especially as his heart, like Jacob's, had a yearning for his last born.

Although struggling against any preference, he could not help thinking at times, how much happier it would have made him if Henry would but imitate the conduct of Nigel – even though their *rôles* should be reversed! But it seemed as if this desire

was not to be gratified. During their sojourn within college walls, the rumours of *diableries*, of which his younger son had been the hero, were scarce compensated by the reports of scholastic triumphs on the part of the elder.

It is true that Nigel himself had been habitually the herald to proclaim these mingled insinuations and successes, for Henry was but an indifferent correspondent. His letters, when they did come, were but too confirmatory of the contents of those written by his brother, being generally solicitations for a little more cash. The *ci-devant* soldier, himself generous to a fault, had never failed to forward the cheque, caring less for the money than the way in which it was spent.

The education of the Harding youths was now considered complete. They were enjoying that pleasant interval of idleness, when the chrysalis of the school or college is about to burst forth into a butterfly, and wing its way through the world.

If the old rancour existed it showed no outward sign. A stranger would have seen nothing between the half-brothers beyond a fair fraternal friendship. Henry was frank and outspoken, Nigel reserved and taciturn; but this was their natural disposition, and no one remarked upon it. In all matters of parental respect, the elder brother was the more noticed. He was implicit in his obedience to the wishes of his father; while Henry, on the other hand, was prone to neglect this duty – though only in matters of minor consequence, such as keeping late hours, lavish expenditure, and the like. Still, by such acts the father's heart was

often sorely grieved, and his affection terribly tested.

At length came a cause that tried the temper of the half-brothers towards one another – one before which the strongest fraternal affection has oft changed into bitter hostility. It was love. Both fell in love, and with the same woman – Belle Mainwaring.

Miss Belle Mainwaring was a young lady, whose fair face and fascinating manners might have turned wiser heads than those of the two ex-collegians. She was older than either; but if not in its first blush, she was still in the bloom of her beauty. Like her baptismal name, she was a belle in her own county, which was that inhabited by the Hardings. She was the daughter of an Indian officer, a poor colonel, who, less fortunate than the General, had left his bones in the Punjaub, and his widow just sufficient to maintain her in a simple cottage residence that stood outside, and not far from, the palings of Beechwood Park.

It was a dangerous proximity for two youths just entering on manhood, and with very little business before them beyond making love, and afterwards settling down with a wife. Both would be amply provided for without troubling their heads about a profession. The paternal estate, under the hammer, would any day have realised a clear hundred thousand; and he who cannot live upon half of this is not likely to increase it by a calling.

That the property would be equally divided there was no reason to doubt. There was no entail; and General Harding was not the man from whom an act of partiality might be expected.

The old soldier was not without traits of eccentricity; not exactly crotchets or caprices, but a certain dogmatism of design, and an unwillingness to be thwarted in his ways, derived no doubt from his long exercise of military authority. This, however, was not likely to influence him in matters of a paternal character; and, unless some terrible provocation should arise, his sons, at his death, would no doubt have an equal share in the earnings of his life.

So thought the social circle in which the Hardings moved, or such part of it as took this much interest in their movements. With such fair presumption of being provided for, what could the young Hardings do but look out for something to love, and, in looking out, upon whom should the eyes of both become fixed but on Belle Mainwaring? They did, with all the ardent admiration of youth; and as she returned their respective glances with that speaking reciprocity which only a coquette can give, both fell in love with her. The inspiration came on the same day, the same hour, perhaps in the same instant.

It was at a grand archery *fête*, given by the General himself, to which Miss Mainwaring and her mother had been invited. The archer god was also present at the entertainment, and pierced the hearts of General Harding's two sons with a single arrow.

There was a remarkable difference in their way of showing it. To Miss Mainwaring, Henry was all assiduity, lavish of little attentions, ran to recover her arrows, handed her her bow, held her sunshade while she bent it, and stood ready to fling himself

at her feet. Nigel, on the other hand, kept himself aloof, affected indifference to her presence, tried to pique her by showing partiality to others, with many like manoeuvres suggested by a calculating and crafty spirit. In one thing the elder brother succeeded – in concealing his new-sprung passion from the spectators.

The younger was not so fortunate. Before the archery practice was over, every guest upon the ground could tell that, at least, one arrow had been shot home to the mark, and that mark was the heart of young Henry Harding.

Chapter Four
A Coquette

I have often wondered what the world would be without woman: whether, if it were without her, man would care longer to live in it; or whether he would then find it just the place he has been all his life longing for, and would wish never to leave it. I have wondered and pondered upon this point, until speculation became lost in obscurity. It is, perhaps, the most interesting philosophical question of our existence – its most important one; and yet no philosopher, as far as I know, has given a satisfactory answer to it.

I am aware of the two theories that have been propounded – to one another opposite as are the poles. One makes woman the sole object of, our existence – her smile its only blessing. For her we work and watch, we dig and delve, we fight and write, we talk and strive. Without her we would do none of these things; in short, do nothing, since there would be no motive for doing. "What then?" say the advocates of this theory. "Would existence be tolerable without a motive? Would it be possible?" For our part we can only give the interrogative answer of the phlegmatic Spaniard, "*Quien sabe*?" – no answer at all. The other theory is, that woman, instead of being life's object and blessing, is but its distraction and curse. The supporters of this hypothesis make no

pretence to gallantry, but simply point to experience. Without her, say they, the world would be happy, and they triumphantly add, "what is it?"

Perhaps the only way to reconcile the two theories is to steer midway between them; to regard both as wrong, and both as right; to hold woman in this world as being alike a blessing and a bane; or rather that there are two sorts of women in it, one born to bless, the other to curse – mankind.

It grieves me to class Belle Mainwaring with the latter: for she was beautiful, and might have belonged to the former. I knew her myself – if not well, at least sufficiently to give her correct classification. Perhaps I, too, might have fallen under her fascinations, had I not discovered that she was false, and this discovery protected me.

I made my discovery just in time, though by accident. It was in a ball-room. Belle liked dancing, as do most young ladies of the attractive kind; and there were but few balls in the county, public or private, civilian or military, where you might not see her. I met her at the hunt ball of B – . It was the first time I had seen her. I was introduced by one of the stewards who chanced to have an impediment in his speech. It was of the nasal kind, caused by a split lip. In pronouncing the word "captain" the first syllable came out sounding as "count." There was then a break, and the second, "ain," might have been taken, or *mis-taken*, for the prefix "von." My Christian and baptismal names, slurred together as they were by the stammering steward, might have passed muster

as Germanic; at all events, for some time afterwards – before I could find an opportunity to rectify the error – I was honoured by Miss Mainwaring with a title that did not belong to me. I was further honoured by having it inscribed upon her dancing card much oftener than I, in my humility, had any right to expect. We danced several measures together, round and square. I was pleased, flattered – something more – charmed and delighted. Who would not, at being so signalised by one of the belles of the ball-room? And she was one.

I began to fancy that it was all up with me – that I had found not only an agreeable partner for the night, but for life. I was all the better satisfied to see scowling faces around me, and hear whispered insinuations, that I was having more than my share of the charming creature. It was the pleasantest hunt ball I had ever attended.

So far up to a certain hour. Then things became less agreeable. I had deposited my partner on a couch, alongside a stately dame, introduced to me as her mother. I saw that this lady did not take kindly to me; but, on the contrary, sat stiff, frigid, and uncommunicative. Failing to thaw her, I made my bow and sauntered off among the crowd, promising to return to Miss Mainwaring for still another dance, for which I had succeeded in engaging her. Not being able to find any comfort apart from her, I soon returned, and sat down on a chair close to the couch occupied by mother and daughter. As they were engaged in close conversation, neither of them saw me, and of course I did not

intrude. But, as their voices were above a whisper, I could not help hearing them; and the mention of my own name made it difficult for me to withdraw.

"A count!" said the mother; "you are beside yourself, my child."

"But Mr Southwick introduced me to him as such, and he has all the air of it."

All the air of it! – I liked that.

"Count Fiddlestrings. Mr Southwick is a fool and an ass. He's only a paltry captain – on half-pay at that, without the shadow of an expectation. Lady C – has been telling me all about him."

"Indeed!"

I thought there was a sigh, but I could not be sure of it. I should have liked it very much; but then what came after would, or should, have rendered me indifferent to it.

"And you've engaged yourself to him for another dance, while young Lord P – has been twice here to ask for you – absolutely on his knees for me to intercede for him!"

"What's to be done?"

"Done! throw him over. Tell him you forgot that you had a previous engagement with Lord P – ."

"Very well, mamma, if you say so, I'll do that. I'm so sorry it should have happened."

There was no sigh this time, else I might have held my peace, and stolen quietly away. But I found I could not retreat without being discovered. In fact, I was at that moment discovered, and

determined on making a clean breast of it.

"I should be sorry, Miss Mainwaring," I said, addressing myself directly to the daughter, and without heeding the confusion of herself or her mother, "to stand in the way of a previous engagement, and rather than Lord P – should get on his knees for the third time, I beg to release you from that you have made with a paltry captain."

With a bow, which I considered suitable to the circumstances, I parted from the Mainwarings, and did my best to get rid of my chagrin by dancing with any girl who would accept for her partner a captain on half-pay! Fortunately, before the ball was over, I found one who caused me to forget my *contretemps* with Miss Belle Mainwaring. I often met this lady afterwards, but never spoke to her, except by that silent speech of the eyes that may sometimes say a good deal.

Chapter Five
Two Strings to the Bow

It might have been well for young Henry Harding, and perhaps his brother Nigel, too, in their first essay at love-making with Miss Mainwaring, had they met with a similar mischance to that which had befallen me, and taken it in the same spirit. As it was, they were either more or less fortunate. Neither was a half-pay captain, without expectations; and, instead of a discouragement almost amounting to dismissal, for a long time both were permitted to bask in the smiles of the beautiful Belle.

There was a marked difference in the way the two brothers respectively pressed their suit. Henry essayed to carry Belle Mainwaring's heart by storm. Nigel, as his nature dictated, preferred making approach by sap and trenching. The former made love with the boldness of the lion; the latter with the insidious stealth of the tiger. When Henry believed himself successful he made no attempt to conceal his gratification. When the chances seemed to go against him, with equal openness did he exhibit his chagrin. The reverse with Nigel. When fortune appeared to smile upon his suit he showed no sign of being conscious of it. He appeared alike impassable under her frown. So little demonstrative was he in his affection for Miss Mainwaring that there were few people believed in it, though

among this few was the lady herself.

From what I could learn, and sometimes by the evidence of my own eyes, she played her cards to perfection – her mother acting as *croupier* to the game. It was not long before she knew that she could take her choice of the two, though some time before she declared it. Now one appeared to be the favourite, anon the other – until the most intimate of her associates were puzzled as to her partiality, or whether she even cared for either. It was at least a question; for the beautiful Belle did not restrict herself to receiving the admiration of the half-brothers Harding. There were other young gentlemen in the neighbourhood, who at balls and other gatherings were favoured with an occasional smile; and Miss Mainwaring's heart was considered still doubtful in its inclinings. There was a time, however, when it was supposed to have become decided. At all events, there was a reason for its doing so. An incident occurred in the hunting-field that should have entitled Henry Harding to the hand of Belle Mainwaring – that is, supposing it to be true that the brave deserve the fair. It was an incident so rare as to be worth recording, irrespective of its bearing upon our tale.

The hunt was with the staghounds, and the "meet" had taken place close to a pond of considerable size, upon one of the open commons not rare among the Chiltern Hills. As the stag bounded away from the cart, his eye had caught the gleam of water, and in his hour of distress he remembered it. Being a lazy brute, he did not run far; but, guided by instinct, soon turned back towards the

pond. He arrived at it, before the carriages that had come to the meet had cleared away from the ground. Among them was the pony-phaeton that contained Mrs Mainwaring and her daughter Belle; the latter looking as roseate on that crisp winter's morning as if her cheeks had taken their colour from the scarlet coats of the huntsmen around her. The *attelage* to which she belonged was drawn up close to the edge of the pond, parallel with its bank. The stag, on returning, shaved close past the pony's nose, and plunged into the water. The consequence was that the latter became alarmed even to frenzy; and, instead of turning towards the road, it wheeled round in the opposite direction, and rushed into the pond after the stag, dragging the phaeton along with it. It did not stop until the water was up over the steps of the carriage, and the ladies' feet were immersed in the chilly flood. But then the stag had stopped too, at bay; and, believing the "trap" to be its cruel pursuer, the bayed animal turned and charged upon the pony carriage and its contents. The pony was knocked down in the traces; and then came the boy in buttons, who was perched conspicuously on the seat behind. On the antlers of the enraged animal he was hoisted skyward, and fell with a plunge into the water. Next came the turn of the two ladies, or would have come, had relief not been near. The smock-frocks had gone away from the ground, following the chase; and it was not they who rushed to the rescue. Nor was it Nigel Harding, who was first by the edge of the pond, having got there through being last in the field. But there stayed he, sitting irresolute in his saddle;

and Miss Mainwaring might have had a stag's antler through her delicate skin, but for Nigel's brother coming up at the moment. He, instead of reining up by the water's edge, dashed in through it, till his horse stood by the side of the carriage. Next moment he sprang out of the saddle, and took the stag by the horns.

The struggle that ensued might have ended ill for him; but by this time a smock-frock, in the shape of a hedger, up to his armpits in the water, drew his chopper across the throat of the stag, and the conflict came to an end.

The pony, but slightly injured, was got upon its feet; the page, half-drowned, was hoisted back to his pinnacle; and the carriage, with its frightened occupants, conducted safely to the shore.

Everybody left the ground with the belief that Miss Belle Mainwaring would at some day, not far distant, become Mrs Henry Harding. More especially did the country people believe it, and were delighted with the idea; for with them – as is generally the case – the younger brother was the favourite.

Chapter Six
The Gathering Cloud

At Beechwood Park there was comfort of every kind; but not that perfect tranquillity which its owner had counted upon, on retiring to this fair residence to pass the remainder of his days.

With his property all was well. Since his purchase of the estate – like other lands around – it had nearly doubled in value; and, so far as fortune was concerned, there was no source of uneasiness. But there was something else – something dearer to him than his houses and lands. Anxiety had arisen from the conduct of his sons. Notwithstanding their apparent cordiality in his presence, on both sides assumed, he had found reasons for believing there was no fraternal affection, but, instead, a tacit enmity between them. This was more openly exhibited on the part of the younger, but it was deep-rooted in the heart of his first-born. Henry, of a generous, forgiving nature, could at any time during college days have been induced to forego it, had his brother met him but half-way in any measure of reconciliation. But this Nigel never desired to do; and the early estrangement had now deepened into hostility – the cause, of course, being their rivalry in love.

It was a long time before the General knew of the dangerous cloud that was looming up on the horizon of his tranquil life. He had taken it for granted that his sons, like most of the young men

so circumstanced, before thinking of marriage, would want to see something of the world. It did not occur to him that, in the eyes of an ardent youth, beautiful Belle Mainwaring was a world in herself, after seeing whom, all earth besides might present but a dull, prosaic aspect.

It was not this, however, that at first troubled the spirit of the retired officer, but only the behaviour of his boys. With Nigel's he was contented enough. Than it, nothing could be more satisfactory, except in the estrangement towards his brother, and an occasional exhibition of ill-feeling which the father could not fail to perceive. It was Henry's conduct that formed the chief source of the General's anxiety – his extravagant habits, his proneness to dissipation, and once un apparent disobedience of paternal orders, which, though only in some trivial affair of expenditure, had been exaggerated by the secret representations of his elder brother into a matter of momentous importance. The counsels of the parent, not having been seriously taken to heart, soon became chidings; and these, in their turn, being alike unheeded, assumed the form of threats and hints about disinheritance.

Henry, who now deemed himself a man, met such reminders with a spirit of independence that only irritated his father to a still greater degree. In this unhappy way were things going on, when the General was made aware of a matter more affecting the future welfare of his son than all the dissipations and disobediences of which he had been guilty. It was his partiality for Miss

Mainwaring. Of Nigel's inclining toward the same quarter, he knew nothing; nor, indeed, did others; though almost everybody in the neighbourhood had long been aware of her conquest over Henry.

It was shortly after the incident at the stag-hunt that the General became apprised of it. That affair had led him to reflect; and, although proud of the gallantry his son had displayed, the old soldier saw in it a danger far greater than that of the struggle through which he had so conspicuously passed.

He was led to make inquiries, which resulted in a discovery giving him the greatest uneasiness. This arose from the fact, that he knew the antecedents of Mrs Mainwaring. He had known both her husband and herself in India; and this knowledge, so far from inspiring him with respect for the relict of his late brother-officer, had impressed him with the very opposite opinion. With the character of the daughter, he was, of course, less acquainted. The latter had grown up during a long period of separation; but from what he had seen and heard of her, since his arrival in England, and from what he was every day seeing and hearing, he had come to the conclusion, that it was a case of "like mother, like daughter."

And, if so, it would not suit his views, that she should become daughter-in-law to him.

The thought filled him with serious alarm; and he at once set about concocting some scheme to counteract the danger. How was he to proceed? Deny his son the privilege of keeping

company with her? Lay an embargo on his visits to the villa-cottage of the widow, which he now learned had been of late suspiciously frequent? It was a question whether his commands would be submitted to, and this thought still further irritated him.

Over the widow herself he had no authority, in any way. Though her cottage stood close to his park, it was not his property; her landlord was a lawyer, of little respect in the neighbourhood; and it would have served no purpose even could he have, himself, given her notice to quit. Things had already gone too far for such strategy as that.

As for the damsel herself, she was not going to hide her beautiful face from the gaze of his son, solely to accommodate him. It might not appear any more in his own dining, or drawing-room; but there were other places where it could be seen in all its bewitching beauty – in the church, or the hunting-field, – in the ball-room, and every day along the green lanes that encompassed Beechwood Park; there might it be seen, smiling coquettishly under the rim of a prettily-trimmed hat.

The old soldier was too skilled a tactician to believe, that any benefit could be obtained from an attack so open to repulses, and these of the most humiliating character. Some stratagem must be resorted to; and to the conception of this he determined to devote all the energies of his nature.

He had already, in his mind, the glimmering of a scheme that promised success; and this imparted a ray of comfort, that kept him from going quite out of his senses.

Chapter Seven
Plotters for Fortune

The stag-hunt, at which Henry Harding had exhibited such gallant courage, had been the very last of the season; and, soon after, spring stole over the shire of Bucks, clothing its beechen forests and grassy glades in a new livery of the gayest green. The crake had come into the cornfield, the cuckoo winged her way across the common, uttering her soft monotonous notes, and the nightingale had once more taken possession of the coppice, from whence, through the livelong night, pealed forth its incomparable song. It was the month of May – that sweet season when all nature seems to submit itself to the tender inclinings of love; when not only the shy birds of the air, but the chased creatures of the earth – alike tamed and emboldened by its influence – stray beyond the safety of their coverts in pursuit of those pleasures at other seasons denied them.

Whether the love-month has any influence on the passions of the human species, is a disputed question. Perhaps, in man's primitive state, such may have been the case, and Nature's suggestiveness may have extended also to him. But at whatever season affection may spring up between two young hearts, surely this is the time of the year that Nature has designed it to reach maturity.

It seemed so in the case of Henry Harding. In the month of May his passion for Belle Mainwaring had reached the point that should end in a declaration; and upon this he had determined. With the outside world it was still a question whether his love was reciprocated, though it was generally thought that the coquette had been at length captured, and by Henry Harding. The eligibility of the match favoured this view of the case, though, to say the truth, not more than the personal appearance of the man.

At this time the younger son of General Harding was just entering upon manhood, and possessed a face and figure alike manly and graceful. The only blemish that could be brought against him was of a moral nature – as already mentioned, a proneness to dissipation. But time might remedy this; and even as things stood it did not so materially damage him in the eyes of his lady acquaintances – more than one of whom would have been willing to take Miss Mainwaring's chances. The light in which Belle regarded him may be best learnt from a conversation that, about this time, took place. It was over the breakfast-table in her mother's cottage, the speakers being her mother and herself.

"And you would marry him?" interrogated Mrs Mainwaring, after some remark that had introduced the name of Henry Harding.

"I would, mamma; and, with your leave, I will."

"What about *his* leave?"

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Belle with a confident air. "I think I may count upon that. He has as good as given it."

"Already! But has he really declared himself – in words I mean?"

"Not exactly in words. But, dear ma, since I suppose you will insist upon knowing my secrets before giving your consent, I may as well tell you all about it. He intends to declare himself soon; this very day if I am not astray in my chronology."

"What reason have you for thinking so?"

"Only his having hinted that he had something important to say to me – time fixed for a call he is to make this afternoon. What else could it be?"

Mrs Mainwaring made no reply, but sat thoughtful, as if not altogether pleased with the communication her daughter had made.

"I hope, dear mamma, you are contented?"

"With what, my child?"

"With – with – well, to have Henry Harding for your son-in-law. Does it satisfy you?"

"My dearest child," answered the Indian officer's widow, with that cautious air peculiar to her country – she was Scotch. "It is a serious question this; very serious, and requires careful consideration. You know how very straitened are our circumstances – how your poor dear father left little to support us – having but little to leave?"

"I should think I do know," peevishly interposed Belle. "Twice turning my ball dresses, and then dyeing them into wearing silks, has taught me all that. But what has it to do with my marrying

Henry Harding? All the more reason why I should. He, at all events, is not likely to be troubled with straitened circumstances."

"I am not so sure of that, my child."

"Ah! you know something about his expectations then? Something you have not told me? Is it so, mamma?"

"I know very little. I wish it were otherwise, and I could be sure."

"But his father is rich. There are but two sons; and you have already told me that the estate is not entailed, or whatever you call it. Of course he will divide it equally between them. Half would satisfy me."

"And me too, child, if we were sure of half. But there lies the difficulty. It is the fact of the estate not being entailed that makes it. Were that done, there would be none."

"Then I could marry Henry?"

"No, Nigel."

"Oh, mamma! what do you mean?"

"The estate would then be Nigel's by the simple law of entail. As it is now, it is all uncertain how they will inherit. It will depend on the will. It may go by a caprice of their father – and I know General Harding well enough to believe him capable of such caprice."

In her turn Belle became silent and thoughtful.

"There is reason to fear," continued the match-making, perhaps match-spoiling, mother, "that the General may leave Henry nothing, or at most only a maintenance. He is certainly

very much dissatisfied with his conduct, and for a long time has been vainly endeavouring to change it. I won't say the young man is loose in his habits; if he were, I would not hear of him for your husband. No, my child, poor as we are, it needn't come to that."

As the widow said this she looked half interrogatively towards her daughter, who replied with a smile of assenting significance.

"Henry Harding," continued the cautious mother, "is too generous – too profuse in his expenditures."

"But, mamma, would not marriage cure him of that? He would then have me to think of, and take better care of his money."

"True, true; supposing him to be possessed of it. But therein lies the doubt – the difficulty, I may call it – about the prudence of your accepting him."

"But I love him; I do indeed!"

"I am sorry for that, my child. You should have been more cautious, until better assured about his circumstances. You must leave it to time. You will, if you love me."

"And if, as I have told you – this afternoon – what answer?"

"Evasive, my dear. Nothing easier. You have me to fall back upon. You are my only child; my consent will be necessary. Come, Belle! you need no instructions from me. You will lose nothing by a little procrastination. You have nothing to fear from it, and everything to gain. Without it, you may become the wife of one poorer than ever your father was; and, instead of having to turn your silk dresses, you may have none to turn. Be prudent, therefore, in the step you are about to take."

Belle only answered with a sigh; but it was neither so sad or so deep as to cause any apprehension to her counsellor; while the sly look that accompanied it told, that she determined upon being *prudent*.

Chapter Eight
Father and Son

General Harding was accustomed to spend much time in his studio, or library it might be called – since it contained a goodly number of books. They were mostly volumes that related to Oriental subjects, more especially works upon India and its campaigns; but there were also many devoted to science and natural history, while scattered here and there upon tables were odd numbers of the *Oriental Magazine*, the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society*, and the *Calcutta Englishman*. There were also large pamphlets in blue parliamentary covers, that related only to the affairs of the Hon. E.I.C.

In poring over these volumes, the retired *militaire* was accustomed to pass much of his time. The subjects, with the descriptions attached, recalled scenes in his past life, the souvenirs of which gave him pleasure, enabling him to while away many an hour that, amidst the seclusion of the Chiltern Hills, might have otherwise hung rather heavily on his hands. Each new book about India was sure to find its way into the General's library, and, though never a very keen sportsman, he could enjoy the descriptions of hunting scenes to be found in the pages of "Markham" and the "Old Shikaree," since in both there is something to interest not only the sportsman but the student

of Nature.

On a certain morning he had entered his studio, but with no intention of devoting himself to the tranquil study of his books. On the contrary, he did not even seat himself, but commenced pacing the floor with a quick step; while his clouded brow denoted agitation of mind. Every now and then he would stop, strike his clenched hand against his forehead, mutter a few words to himself, and then move on again. Among his mutterings could be distinguished some words that guided to the subject of his thoughts. The names "Nigel" and "Henry" constantly occurring, told that both his sons had a share in his cogitations, though chiefly the latter, whose cognomen was most frequently pronounced.

"This boy Henry has half driven me mad with his wild ways. And now, worse than all, his affair with this girl. From what I have heard, there can be no doubt that she's entangled him; no doubt of its having become serious. It won't do; must be broken off, cost what it will. She's not the stuff to make an honest man's wife out of. I'd care less if it were Nigel. But no, she won't do for either – for no son of mine. I knew her mother too well. Poor Mainwaring! Many a dog's day he spent with her in India. Like mother, like daughter. By heavens, it won't do; and I shall put a stop to it! I think I know how," continued he reflectingly. "If he's mad, she isn't; and therein I may find my means for saying the poor lad from the worst of all misfortunes – a wicked wife."

The General made several turns in silence, as if maturing some

plan.

"Yes; that's the way to save him!" he at length joyfully exclaimed; "perhaps the only way. And there's no time to be lost about it. While I'm thinking he may be acting – may have gone too far for me to get him out of the scrape. I shall see him at once – see and question him."

The General stooped over the table; pressed upon a spring-bell; and then resumed his pacing.

The bell brought up the butler, a portly individual, who so far as could be judged by appearance, was as respectable as the General himself.

"Williams! I wish to see my son Henry; – find out if he's upon the premises."

"He's on the premises, General. He's down at the stables. Groom says he's going to mount the brown filly."

"The brown filly? Why she's never been ridden before!"

"She never has, General. I think it very dangerous; but that's just what Master Henry likes. I tried to persuade him against it, but then Master Nigel told me to mind my own business."

"Send quick to the stable; tell him I forbid his riding the filly. Tell him to come hither. Haste, Williams, haste!"

"Ever running into danger, as if he loved it," said the General, continuing his soliloquy; "so like what I was myself. The brown filly! Ah! I wish this was all. The Mainwaring damsel's a worse danger than that."

At this moment Henry made his appearance, breeched,

booted, and spurred, as if for the hunting-field.

"Did you send for me, father?"

"Of course I did. You were going to mount the brown filly?"

"I am going. Have you any objection to my doing so?"

"Do you want your neck broken?"

"Ha, ha, ha! There's not much fear of that. I think you make light of my horsemanship, papa."

"You carry too much confidence, sir – far too much. You mount a vicious mare without consulting me. You do other and more important things without consulting me. I intend putting a stop to it."

"What other things do you refer to, father?"

"Many other things. You spend money foolishly – like a madman; and, like a maniac, you are now rushing upon a danger of a still graver kind – upon destruction, sir – rank, absolute destruction."

"Of what are you speaking, father? Do you mean by my mounting the filly?"

"No, sir. You may back her, and break your neck, for aught I care. I'm speaking of what's far wickeder – a woman."

The word woman caused the youth to turn pale. He had thought that, to his father at least, his love for Miss Mainwaring was still a secret. No other woman could be meant.

"I do not understand you, papa," was his evasive response.

"But you do, sir – perfectly. If I gave you the name of this woman, you wouldn't be any the wiser than you are now; you

know it too well. I'll tell you, for all that. I refer to Miss Belle Mainwaring."

Henry made no reply, but stood blushing in the presence of his parent.

"And now, sir, about this woman I have only a few words to say —*you must give her up*."

"Father!"

"I won't listen to any of your love-sick appeals. Don't make them – they'll only be wasted on me. I repeat, sir, you must give Belle Mainwaring up – at once, absolutely, and for ever!"

"Father," said the youth, in a firm tone, within his breast love pleading for justice, "you ask me to do what's not in my power. I acknowledge that between myself and Miss Mainwaring there is something more than the affection of friendship. It has gone further than mere feeling. There have been words – I may say promises – between us. To break them, requires the consent of both parties; and for me to do so, without first consulting her, would be a cruel injustice, to which I cannot lend myself. No, father; not even with the alternative of incurring your displeasure."

General Harding stood for a moment silent; pretending to reflect, but furtively contemplating his son. A superficial observer could have seen only anger at this filial defiance, where one clever in reading faces might have detected something like admiration mingling with the sentiment. If there was such, however, in his heart, his speech did not show it.

"Enough, sir! You have made up your mind to disobey me? Very well. Understand what this disobedience will cost you. I suppose you know the meaning of an entailed estate?"

The General paused, as if for an answer.

"I know nothing about it, papa. Something connected with a will, I believe."

"The very reverse. An entailed estate has nothing to do with a will. Now, my estate is *not* entailed, and *is* connected with a will. It is about that I am going to talk to you. I can make one, giving my property to whomsoever I please; either to your brother Nigel or yourself. Marry Miss Mainwaring, and it shall be Nigel's. Still, to you I shall leave just enough to carry you out of the country – that is one thousand pounds sterling. Now, sir, you hear what I have to say."

"I hear it, father; and with sorrow. I shall be sorry to lose the inheritance I had reason to expect, but far more your esteem. Both, however, must be parted with, if there be no other consideration for my retaining them. Whether I am to marry Miss Mainwaring or not, must depend upon Miss Mainwaring herself. I think, father, you understand me?"

"Too well, sir – too well; and I answer by telling you that I have passed my word, and it shall be kept. You may go and mount the filly, and thank God she don't do with your neck what you are likely to do with your father's heart – break it. Begone, sir!"

Without saying a word, Henry walked out of the room, slowly and sadly.

“The image of his mother! Who could not help liking the lad, in spite of his rebellious spirit, and with all his wasteful habits? It won’t do to have such a noble heart sacrificed upon a worthless jade of a woman. He must be saved.”

Once more the General pressed upon the spring-bell, this time more violently than before. It brought the butler back in double quick time.

“Williams!”

“General?”

“My carriage, as soon as the horses can be put to?”

Williams disappeared to cause execution of the order.

A few more turns to and fro across the Turkey carpet, a few muttered soliloquies, and the carriage wheels grated upon the gravel outside.

Williams helped the General to his hat and gloves; saw him down-stairs; handed him into the carriage; and watched it rolling away, just as Henry, on the back of the brown filly, was fighting her across the green sward of the park, endeavouring to keep her head in the opposite direction.

Chapter Nine
The Checkmate

Mr Woolet sat in his office, which was separated from that of his solitary clerk by a thick wall and a narrow doorway between. But there was another wall of slighter dimensions, alongside Mr Woolet's room, partitioning off a kind of cupboard enclosure, into which, when Mr Woolet required it, the said clerk could introduce himself, and there, standing cat-like and silent, hear what passed between his employer and any client whose conversation it was deemed necessary to make note of.

After this it is scarce necessary to add that Mr Woolet was an attorney; and though the scene of his practice was a quiet country town, in the shire of Bucks, this practice was carried on with as much sharpness and trickery, as if it lay among the low courts surrounding Newgate, or the slums of Clerkenwell.

The great city does not monopolise the plant called *pettifogging*. It thrives equally as strong in the county town. Even the village knows it to its cost; and the poor cottager, in his leaky shed at three shillings a week, is too often encompassed by its toils.

Of such small fry Mr Woolet had hooked his hundreds, and had prospered by their capture to the keeping of a carriage and pair; but, as yet, none of the big fish had entered his net –

the largest being the widow Mainwaring, who had been caught while taking from him a lease of her cottage. The carriage had, therefore, been kept to no purpose, or less than none: since not being in accord with his position it only brought him ridicule. This, however, could not last for ever. The gentry could not always hold out against such a glittering attraction. Some swell must in time stand in need of Mr Woolet's peculiar services, and enable him to achieve the much wished-for position. And so it seemed to turn out, as one day a carriage much grander than Mr Woolet's own, with a coachman nearly a quarter of a ton in weight, and a powdered footman beside him, drove through the street of the little town in which Mr Woolet lived, and pulled up opposite his office.

Perhaps the lawyer was never more delighted in his life, than when his clerk protruded his phiz inside the office-door, and announced *sotto voce* the arrival of General Harding. In a moment after the same individual ushered the General into his presence. A masonic sign communicated to the clerk caused his disappearance; and the instant after that pale-faced familiar was skulking like a ghost within the cupboard enclosure.

"General Harding, I believe?" said the obsequious attorney, bowing to the lowest button of his visitor's surtout.

"Yes," bluffly responded the old soldier. "That is my name. Yours is – "

"Woolet, General; E. Woolet, at your service."

"Well, I want some service from you – if you're not otherwise

engaged."

"Any engagement, General, must stand aside for you. What can I do to oblige you?"

"To oblige me, nothing. I want your services as an attorney. You are one, I believe?"

"My name is in the Law List, General. You can see it here."

Mr Woolet took up a small volume, and was handing it to the General.

"Never mind about the Law List," bluntly interrupted the soldier, "I see it on your sign; that's enough for me. What I'm in search of is an attorney who can make a will. I suppose you can do that?"

"Well, General, although I cannot boast of my professional abilities, I think I can manage the making of a will."

"Enough said; sit down and set about it."

Considering that he kept a carriage himself, Mr Woolet might have felt a little offended by this brusque behaviour on the part of his new client. It was the first time he had ever been so treated in his own office; but then it was the first time he had ever had a client of such a class, and he knew better than to show feeling under the infliction.

Without saying another word, he sat down before his table, the General taking a seat on the opposite side, and waited for the latter to proceed.

"Write now as I dictate," said the General, without even prefixing the word "please."

The lawyer, still obsequious, signified assent, at the same time seizing a pen, and placing a sheet of blue foolscap before him.

"*I hereby will and bequeath to my eldest son, Nigel Harding, all my real and personal estate, comprising my houses and lands, as also my stock in personal securities, excepting one thousand pounds, to be sold out of the last, and paid over to my other and youngest son, Henry Harding, as his sole legacy left from my estate*."

To this extent the lawyer finished the writing, and waited for his client to proceed.

"You have done, have you?" asked the General.

"So far as you dictated, General, I have."

"Have you written down the date?"

"Not yet, General."

"Then put it in."

Woolet took up his pen, and complied.

"Have you a witness at hand? If not, I can bring in my footman."

"You need not do that, General. My clerk will do for one witness."

"Oh! it wants two, does it?"

"That is the law, General; but I myself can be the second."

"All right, then; let me sign."

And the General rose from his seat, and leaned towards the table.

"But, General," interposed the lawyer, thinking the will a

somewhat short one, “is this all? You have two sons?”

“Of course I have. Haven’t I said so in my will?”

“But, surely – ”

“Surely what?”

“You are not going to – ”

“I am going to sign my will, if you will allow me; if not, I must get it made elsewhere.”

Mr Woolet was too much a man of business to offer any further opposition. It was no affair of his beyond giving satisfaction to his new client; and to accomplish this he at once pushed the paper before the General, at the same time presenting him with the pen.

The General signed; the lawyer and his clerk – summoned from the cupboard – attested; and the will was complete.

“Now make me a copy of it,” demanded the General. “The original you may keep till called for.”

The copy was made; the General buttoned it up in the breast of his surtout; and then, without even cautioning the lawyer to secrecy, stepped back into his carriage, and was soon rolling along the four miles of road lying between the village and his own residence.

“There’s something queer about all this,” soliloquised the pettifogger, when left alone in his office. “Queer he should come to me, instead of going to his own solicitor; and queerer still he should disinherit the younger son – or next thing to it. His property cannot be worth less than a cool hundred thousand

pounds, and all to go to that half-negro, while the other, as most people thought, would have a half share of it. After all, it's not so strange. He's angry with the younger son; and in making this will he comes to me instead of going to Lawson, who he knows might say something to dissuade him from his purpose. I have no doubt he will stick to it, unless the young scamp leaves off his idle ways. General Harding is not a man to be trifled with, even by his own son. But whether this will is to remain good or not, it's my duty to make it known to a third party, who for certain reasons will be deeply interested in its contents; and who, whether she may ever be able to thank me for communicating them, will, at all events, keep the secret of my doing so. She shall hear of it within the hour."

"Mr Robson!"

The pale face of the unarticled clerk appeared within the doorway – prompt as a stage spirit summoned through a trap.

"Tell the coachman to clap the horses into my carriage – quick as tinder."

The spirit disappeared without making any reply, and just as his invoker had finished the folding of the lately attested will, and made a minute of what had transpired between him and the testator, carriage wheels were heard outside the door of the office.

In six seconds after Mr Woolet was in his "trap" – as he used condescendingly to call it – and rattling along a country road, the same taken ten minutes before by the more ostentatious equipage

of the retired Indian officer.

Although driving the same way, the destination of the two vehicles was different. The chariot was bound for Beechwood Park, the “trap” for a less pretentious residence outside its enclosure – the villa-cottage occupied by the widow Mainwaring.

Chapter Ten
The Bait Taken

The relict of the late colonel, who had left his hones in the Punjaub and herself with only a slight maintenance, had nevertheless sufficient to maintain a "turn-out." True it was but a pony and phaeton; but the pony was spirited, the phaeton a neat one, and with the charming Belle in it, hat on head, whip and ribbons in hand, it might have been termed stylish. The appearance was improved by a boy in buttons, who sat upon the back seat, well trained to sustain the dignity of the situation.

This choice little tableau of country life might have been seen at the gate of Mrs Mainwaring's villa at eleven o'clock of that same day, on which the conversation already reported had passed between herself and her daughter in the breakfast-room.

It was an early hour for a drive; but it was to be a journey upon business to her lawyer. It was never made; for just as the sprightly Belle had taken her seat in the phaeton, adjusted her drapery, and commenced "catching flies" with her whip, what should appear coming up the road, and at a spanking pace, but the two-horse trap of that lawyer himself, Mr Woolet.

The trap was evidently *en route* for the widow's residence, where more than once it had brought its owner upon matters of business. Its approach was a fortunate circumstance; so thought

Mrs Mainwaring, so thought her daughter, neither of whom on that particular day desired to go to the town. It was not one that had been set apart for shopping; more important matters were on the *tapis*, and these could be arranged with Mr Woolet on the spot. The phaeton was at once abandoned, "Buttons" receiving orders to keep the pony by the gate, and the ladies, followed by the lawyer, returned into the cottage. The attorney was received in the drawing-room; but, as the business could have nothing to do with the beautiful Belle, her presence was excused, and she sauntered out again, leaving her mother alone with Mr Woolet.

Though there was still a certain obsequiousness about the lawyer's manner, it was very different from that he had exhibited when dealing with General Harding. There was a vast distinction between a live General, possessed of a clear hundred thousand pounds, and a defunct colonel's widow, with scarce so many pence. Still, Mrs Mainwaring was a lady of acknowledged social position, with a daughter who might at no distant day have the *control* of a gentleman who had a hundred thousand pounds, and who might become a profitable client of whoever chanced at the time to be her mother's solicitor. Mr Woolet was a sharp, far-seeing individual, and this forecast had not escaped him. If he showed himself more at ease in the presence of the colonel's widow than he had done in that of the General, it was simply because he recognised in the lady a nature like his own – less scrupulous upon points of honour or etiquette.

"Have you any business with me, Mr Woolet?" asked the lady,

without making known the fact that she was about going on business to him.

"Well, Mrs Mainwaring, scarce enough to make it worth while my calling on you – at all events, interrupting your drive. What I have to say may be of no importance – but five minutes will suffice for saying it."

"Take what time you please, Mr Woolet; our drive had no object – a little shopping affair of my daughter's, that can be disposed of at any hour. Please be seated."

The lawyer took a chair; the lady sank into a couch.

"Something, I suppose, connected with the cottage?" she continued in a tone of studied indifference. "I think the rent is paid up to – "

"Oh, nothing of that," interrupted the lawyer. "You are too punctual in your payments, Mrs Mainwaring, to need reminding from me. I have come upon an affair that, indeed, now that I think of it, may look like interference on my part. But it is one that may be of importance, and, studying your interest as my client, I deem it my duty to interfere. I hope, if in error, you will not be offended by my apparent over-zeal."

The widow opened her eyes, once beautiful enough, but now only expressive of surprise. The manner of the attorney, his tone of confidence – of an almost friendly assurance – led her to look for some pleasant revelation. What could it be?

"Over-zeal on your part can never be offensive, Mr Woolet – at least, not to me. Please let me know what you have to

communicate. Whether it concern me or not, I promise you it shall have my full consideration, and such response as I can give."

"First, Mrs Mainwaring, I must ask a question that from any other might be deemed impertinent. But you have done me the honour to trust me as your legal adviser, and that must be my excuse. There is a rumour abroad – indeed, I might say, something more than a rumour – that your daughter is about to be – to contract an alliance with one of the sons of General Harding. May I ask if this rumour has any truth in it?"

"Well, Mr Woolet, to you I shall answer frankly: there is some truth in it."

"May I further ask which of the General's sons is to be the fortunate, and, I may say, happy individual?"

"Really, Mr Woolet! But why do you want to know this?"

"I have a reason, madam – a reason that also concerns yourself, if I am not mistaken."

"In what way?"

"By reading this, you will learn."

A sheet of bluish foolscap, with the ink scarce dried upon it, was spread out before the eyes of the widow. It was the will of General Harding.

She coloured while reading it. With all the coolness of her Scotch blood; with all the steadiness of nerve produced by an eventful life – in long accompaniment of her husband in his campaigns – she could not conceal the emotion called forth by what she read upon the sheet of foolscap. It was like the echo

of her own thoughts – a response to the reflections that, scarce an hour before, had been not only passing through her mind, but forming the subject of her conversation.

Adroitly as woman could – and Mrs Mainwaring was not the most simple of her sex – she endeavoured to make light of the knowledge thus communicated. She was only sorry that General Harding should so far forget his duties as a parent, to make such a distinction between his two sons. Both were equally of his own blood; and, though the younger might have been of better behaviour, still he was the younger, and time might cure him of those habits which appeared to have given offence to his father. For herself, Mrs Mainwaring was very sorry indeed; and, although it did not so essentially concern her, she could not do otherwise than thank Mr Woolet for his disinterested kindness in letting her know the terms of this strange testament. In fine, she would always feel grateful to him for what he had done.

The last clause of her speech was delivered in a tone not to be misunderstood by such an astute listener as Mr Woolet; and at its conclusion he folded up the will, and prepared to take his departure. To repeat excuses, and say that he had only done what he deemed his duty, were empty words, and were so understood by both.

A glass of sherry, with a biscuit, and the interview came to an end. Mr Woolet returned to his trap, and was soon rolling back to the town; while Buttons was commanded to take back the pony to its stable. The sauntering Belle was summoned into

the drawing-room.

"What did he want, mamma?" was her inquiry on entering. "Anything that concerns me?"

"I should think so. If you marry Henry Harding you will marry a *pauper*. I have seen the will. His father has disinherited him."

Miss Mainwaring sank upon the couch, with a cry that told rather of disappointment than despair.

Chapter Eleven
Awaiting the Proposal

In the afternoon of that day Belle Mainwaring sat upon the couch in a state of expectation not easily described. The more difficult, from its being so rare – that is, the circumstances under which she was placed. She was in the position of a young lady who expects a proposal of marriage to be made to her, and who has already determined upon declining it. She was strong in this determination; though her strength came not from her own inclinations. She was but acting under the commands of her mother.

She was not without some sinking of spirits as to the course she was about to take. In reality she loved the man she was going to reject – more than she imagined then, more than she knew until long afterwards. Flirt as she had been, and still was, conqueress of many a heart, she was not without one herself, – it might not be of the purest and truest; but, such as it was, Henry Harding appeared to have won it.

For all that, he was not to wear it; unless he could surround her with all the adornments of wealth, and the costliest luxuries of social life. She now knew he could not do this; and, though her heart might still be his, her hand must go to some other. To his brother Nigel, perhaps, she may have whispered to herself.

She was a beautiful woman, Belle Mainwaring – tall, large, and exquisitely moulded – a figure that becomes the reclining attitude required by a couch; and, as she so reclined upon ordinary occasions, the coldest observer might well have been excused for admiring her gracefulness.

On the day in question her attitude was not graceful. It was not even easy, nor befitting her figure. She sat bolt upright, now and then starting to her feet; pacing the room in quick, hurried strides; stopping a moment by the window, and scanning the road outside; and then returning to the couch, and staying upon it for a short time, as if a prey to terrible unrest and anxiety.

At times she would sit reflecting on the answer she should give; how it might be shaped, so as to make it least unpalatable to him who was to receive it. She had no doubt about its bitterness; for she felt confident in having the heart of the man about to offer her his hand. She did not wish to unnecessarily give him pain; and she studied the style of her intended refusal, until she fancied she had most cunningly arranged it. But then would come a spasm of her own heart's pain; for to say "No!" was costing it an effort; and at this the whole structure would give way, leaving her intended answer still unshaped.

Once she was on the point of changing her purpose; and, prompted by the nobility of love, she came near giving way to her better nature. She had almost made up her mind to accept Henry Harding spite his adverse fortune – spite the counsels of her mother.

But the noble resolve remained but one moment in her mind. It passed like a flash of lightning, only showing more distinctly the dark clouds that would surround such a destiny. Henry disinherited – a thousand pounds alone left him! It would scarce be enough to furnish the feast, with the trousseau she might expect upon the day of her marriage. Preposterous! Her mother was right; she would yield to the maternal will.

There was another thought that held her to this determination. She felt confident in her conquest; and if at any future time she might see fit to give way to her predilection, it would still be possible to do so. General Harding would repent the disinheritance of his younger son, and revoke the will he had made, perhaps in a moment of spite or passion. Neither the lawyer who made it, nor her own mother, had any idea of the General's doing so. It was not in keeping with his character. But Belle believed differently. She saw through the eyes of hope, lighted by the light of love.

In such frame of mind did Miss Mainwaring await the expected visit of Henry Harding. Nor was there any change, when the boy in buttons announced his arrival, and the moment after ushered him into the room. Perhaps, just at that moment, at the sight of his handsome face and manly form, her heart may have faltered in its resolution. But only for an instant. A thought of his disinheritance, and it was again firm.

She was right as to the object of his coming. Indeed, he had all but declared it at their last interview – all but accomplished it.

Words had already passed between them, that might have been construed as on his side a proposal, and on hers an acceptance. He now came in all the confident expectation of formally closing the engagement by the terms of a betrothal.

Frank, loyal, and without thought of trick or deception, he at once declared his errand.

The answer went like an arrow through his heart – its poison but little subdued by the fact of its being conditional. The conditions were "the consent of mamma."

Henry Harding could not understand this. She, the imperious belle, who in his eyes seemed armed with all power and authority, to have her happiness dependent on the will of a mother, and that mother known to be at the same time selfish and capricious! It was a rebuff unexpected, and filled him with forebodings, as to what might be the decision of Mrs Mainwaring. He was not the man long to endure the agony of doubt; and at once demanded to see her.

His wishes were readily complied with; and, in less than five minutes after, the couch lately graced by the fair, frivolous daughter, was occupied by the staid, serious mother – the daughter absenting herself from the interview.

In the frigid face of the widow Henry Harding read his fate. His forebodings were confirmed. Mrs Mainwaring was sensible of the honour he would have conferred by becoming her son-in-law, and deeply thankful for the offer; but the position in which she and her daughter were placed made such a union impossible.

Mr Harding must know that, by the sudden death of her late dear husband, she had been left in straitened circumstances – that Belle would therefore be without fortune; and that as he, Mr Harding, was in the same position, a union between the two would not only be impolitic, but absolute insanity. Though poor, her child had always been accustomed, if not to the luxuries, at least to the comforts of a home. What would be her condition as the mother of a family, with a husband struggling to maintain them? Mrs Mainwaring could not speculate on such a fate for her dear child; and, although Mr Harding was young, and had the world all before him, he had not been brought up to any profession promising a maintenance, nor yet to those habits likely to lead to it. For these reasons she, Mrs Mainwaring, must firmly, but respectfully, decline the offered alliance.

Throughout the speech, which partook somewhat of the nature of a lecture, Henry Harding sat listening in silence, but with astonishment strongly depicted in his features. This had reached its climax, long before the last sentence was delivered.

"Surely, madam," said he, giving vent to his surprise, "you cannot mean this?"

"Mean what, Mr Harding?"

"What you have said of my inability to support a – your daughter. I know nothing of the struggle you speak of. I admit I have no profession; but my expectations are not so poor as to make it necessary I should have one. Half of my father's estate is sufficient to provide against such a future as you allude to. And

there are but two of us to share it."

"If that be your belief, Mr Harding," rejoined the widow, in the same cold, relentless tone, in which she had all along been speaking, "I am sorry to be the first to disabuse you of it. The estate you speak of will not be so equally divided. Your share in it will be a legacy of a thousand pounds. Such a trifling sum would not go far towards the maintenance of an establishment."

Henry Harding stayed not to answer the last remark, made half interrogatively. In those that preceded it he had heard enough to satisfy him, that he had no longer any business in the drawing-room of Mrs Mainwaring; and hurriedly recovering his hat and cane, he bade her an abrupt good morning.

He did not deign to address the same scant courtesy to her daughter. Between him and Belle Mainwaring was now opened a gulf so wide, that it could never be bridged over – not even to save him from a broken heart.

As the rejected lover strode away from the cottage that contained what he so lately looked upon as his *fiancée*, black clouds came rolling over the sky, as if to symbolise the black thoughts in his heart.

In all his youthful life it was the first great shock he had received; a shock both to soul and body – for in the announcement made by Mrs Mainwaring there was a blow aimed at both. His love blighted, his fortune gone – both, as it were, in the same instant! But the bitterest reflection of all was that the love had gone with the fortune. The loss of the latter he

could have endured; but to think that the sweet speeches that had been exchanged between him and Belle, the tender glances, and the soft, secret pressure of hands that more than once had been mutually imparted – to think that, on her side, all these had been false, heartless, and hollow, was enough to wound something more than the self-esteem of a nature noble as was his. He could frame no excuse for her conduct. He tried, but without success. It was too clear, the cause of her refusal; too clear were the conditions on which she would have accepted his love, and had led him to believe in its acceptance. Her words and acts had been all pretence – the very essence of coquetry. It was over now, and with a bitter vow he resolved to expel her from his heart – from his thoughts, if that were possible. It was youth entering upon a hard struggle; but to a nature like his, and under such temptation to continue it, there was a chance of success. The woman he had hitherto looked upon as the type of all that was innocent and angelic, had proved herself not only capricious, but cunning, selfish, mean, less deserving of love than contempt. If he could but bear this impression upon his mind, there would be a hope of his recovering the heart he had so inconsiderately sacrificed. He registered a mental vow to do this, and then turned his thoughts towards his father. Against him he was all anger. He had no doubt the threat had been carried out; the will had been made that very morning. The minuteness of Mrs Mainwaring's information, even to the exact amount of his own legacy, left him no room to question its correctness. How she had obtained

it he neither knew nor cared. She was sharp-witted enough to have placed herself in communication with his father's solicitor, whom he supposed to have made the will. But he did not stay to speculate upon this. His thoughts were all turned upon the testator himself, who by that single stroke had deprived him at once of his love and his living.

In the agony of his soul he could not see how his father had befriended him – how he had saved him from a fate far worse than disinheritance. His contempt for the cruel coquette was not yet decided enough for this.

His father's threat had been only conditional. He might look forward to a chance of the will being revoked. He might not be restored to full favour. There would be some punishment for his disobedience, which was as complete as if his suit had succeeded. But such a grand penalty would scarce be exacted. It was not compatible with the indulgence he had already experienced.

A meaner spirit would have reasoned thus. Nigel Harding would have done so, and sought restoration to the paternal favour he had forfeited. Not so Henry. His pride had been touched – stung to the quick; and in the midst of his mortification, with his soul suffering from its thwarted passion, while pursuing the path homeward he resolved that his father's house should know him no more.

And he kept this resolution. On reaching the park-gates, instead of entering, he walked on to the nearest inn, and thence took a fly to the nearest railway station.

In another hour he was in the midst of the great metropolis, with no thought of ever again returning to the green Chiltern Hills, or the shire of Buckingham.

Chapter Twelve
Self-Exiled

On that same evening, as usual, there were four chairs placed at the dinner-table of General Harding. One was empty – that which should have been occupied by his younger son.

"Where is he?" asked the General, drawing the napkin across his breast.

Nigel knew not. Of course the maiden aunt could not tell. With her the scapegrace was not a favourite, and she took no heed of his movements. The butler was questioned, but did not know where Master Henry had gone. Nigel could only say he had seen him take the path towards the cottage of the Mainwarings; and a frown darkened his brow as he imparted the intelligence.

"He may have stayed for dinner," added the elder brother; "Mrs Mainwaring makes him so welcome."

"She won't after awhile," said the General, with a smile that to some extent relieved the frown also visible in his face.

Nigel looked at his father, but forbore asking for an explanation. He seemed to divine something that gave him relief, for the shadow upon his brow became sensibly lighter.

Upon that subject the conversation dropped; nor would it have been resumed again during dinner, but that before the meal ended a communication came into the room, through the medium of the

butler. It was in the shape of a note, evidently scrawled in haste, and upon paper that could only have come from the *escritoire* of a cottage or a country inn. From the latter it had issued – the "Hare and Hounds," a hostelry that stood not far from the gates of General Harding's park, on the high road to London. There was no postmark – the letter having been hand-carried.

Hurried as was the scrawl of the superscription, the General recognised it as the handwriting of his son Henry. The shadow returned to his countenance as he tore open the envelope. It grew darker as he deciphered the contents of the note enclosed therein. They were as follows: —

> "Father, —
>
> "I say 'father,' since I cannot dissimulate my real thoughts by prefixing the epithet 'dear,' – when this reaches you I shall be on the road to London, and thence heaven knows where; but never more to return to a house which, by your own decreeing, can no longer be a home for me. I could have borne my disinheritance, for perhaps I deserve it; but the consequences to which it has led are too cruel for me to think of you otherwise than with anger. The deed is now done, and let that be an end of it. I write to you only to say that, since by the terms of your will I may some day become the fortunate recipient of a thousand pounds, perhaps you will have no objection to pay it to me now, deducting, if you please, the usual interest – which I believe can be calculated according to the rules of the Insurance societies. A thousand pounds at your death – which I hope may be far distant

– would scarce be worth waiting for. Now, it would serve my purpose, since I am determined to go abroad and seek fortune under some more propitious sky than that which extends over the Chiltern Hills. But if I do not find the sum at your London lawyer's within three days, subject to my order, I shall make my way abroad all the same. I am not likely ever to ask for it again. So, father, you may choose in this matter, whether to oblige me or not; and perhaps my kind brother Nigel, whose counsels you are so ready to take, may help you in determining the choice.

"Henry Harding."

The General sprang from his chair, long before he had finished reading the letter. He had read it by fits and starts, while striding about the room, and stamping his feet upon the floor, until the glasses jingled upon the table.

"My heavens!" he at length ejaculated, "what is the meaning of this?"

"Of what, dear father?" asked the obsequious Nigel. "You have received some unpleasant news?"

"News! news! worse than news!"

"From whom, may I ask?"

"From Henry – the scamp – the ungrateful – Here, read this!"

Nigel took the note and read. "It is indeed an unpleasant communication; unfeeling of Henry – insulting, I should say. But what does it all mean?"

"No matter what it means. Enough for *me* to know that. Enough to think that he is gone. I know the boy well. He will keep

his word. He's too like myself about that. Gone! O God – gone!"

The General groaned as he traversed the Turkey carpet. The maiden aunt said nothing, but sat by the table, quietly sipping port wine and munching walnuts. The storm raged on.

"After all," put in Nigel, with the pretence of tranquillising it, "he means nothing with this strange talk. He's young – foolish – "

"Means nothing!" roared the General in a fresh burst of excitement. "Does it mean nothing to write such a letter as this – in which every word is a slight to my authority – a defiance?"

"True enough," said Nigel, "I know not what can have possessed him to speak as he has done. He's evidently angry about something – something I don't understand. But he'll get over it in time, though one cannot forgive him so easily."

"Never! I will never forgive him. He has tried my temper too often; but this will be the last time. Disobedience such as his shall be overlooked no longer – to say nothing of the levity, the positive defiance, that accompanies it. By my faith, he shall be punished for it!"

"In that regard," interposed the unctuous elder son, "since he has spoken of my giving you advice, it would be to leave him to himself – at least for a time. Perhaps after he has passed some months without the extravagant support you have hitherto so generously afforded him, he may feel less independent, and more prone to penitence. I think the thousand pounds he speaks of your having promised him, and which I know nothing about, should be kept back."

"He shan't have a shilling of it – not till my death."

"For your sake, dear father, a long time, I hope; and for his, perhaps, it may be all the better so."

"Better or worse, he shan't have a shilling of it – not a shilling. Let him starve till he comes to his senses."

"The best thing to bring him to his senses," chimed in Nigel; "and take my word for it, father, it will do that before long – you'll see."

This counsel seemed to tranquillise the perturbed spirit of the irate General, at least for a time. He returned to the table and to his port; over which he sat alone, and to a much later hour than was his usual custom. The mellow wine may have made him more merciful; but whether it was this or not, before going to bed he returned to his studio, and wrote, in a somewhat unsteady hand, a letter to his London lawyer – directing the latter to pay to his son Henry, on demand, a cheque for the sum of 1,000 pounds.

He despatched the letter by a groom, to be in time for the morning post; and all this he did with an air of caution, as if he intended to do good by stealth. But what appears caution to the mind of a man obfuscated with over a bottle of port, may seem carelessness to those who are around him. There was one who looked upon it in this light. Nigel knew all about the writing of the letter, guessed its contents, and was privy to its despatch for the post. Outside the hall-door it was taken from the hands of the groom to whom it had been intrusted, and transferred to the charge of another individual, who was said to be going

past the village post-office. It was Master Nigel who caused the transference to be made. And from him the new messenger received certain instructions, in consequence of which the letter never reached its destination.

Chapter Thirteen
London Thugs

On arriving in London, Henry Harding put up at a West-end hotel, which he had allowed his cabman to select, for he knew very little of London or its life. He had only paid two or three transient visits to it, and but few of his father's acquaintances resided in the metropolis. Upon these he did not think of calling. He supposed that the affair with his father might have become known to them – perhaps his rejection by Belle Mainwaring – and he had resolved upon keeping out of sight, to avoid the necessity of concealing his chagrin. Henry Harding had a proud spirit, and could neither have brooked ridicule nor accepted sympathy. For this reason, instead of hunting out any old college acquaintances he might have found in London, he rather avoided the chances of meeting them.

Besides the note written to his father, he had addressed one to the footman, simply directing this individual to pack up his clothes, guns, canes, and other impedimenta, and send them on to Paddington station, "till called for." This was done; and the luggage, in due time, arrived at the hotel where he was staying. Some eight or ten pounds of loose money, that chanced to be in his pocket on leaving home, was all the cash he commanded; and this was out of his pocket before he had been half that number

of days in London.

For the first time in his life he began to find what an inconvenient thing it is to be without cash, especially in the streets of a large city – though he yet only knew it as an inconvenience. He expected his father would accede to the request he had made, and send an order for the payment of the thousand pounds. To allow time for the transaction, he kept away from the solicitor's office for nearly a week. He then called to make the inquiry. It was simply whether any communication relating to him had been received from his father. In case there had been none, he did not wish the lawyer to be any wiser about the affair. None had been – not any. This was the answer given him.

In three days he called again, and reiterated his former inquiry almost word for word. Almost word for word was the answer he had – not from the solicitor himself, but the head clerk of his office. General Harding had written no letter lately to Messrs Lawson and Son (the name of the firm), either in reference to him or any other matter. "He's not going, to send it," bitterly soliloquised Henry as he left the solicitor's office. "I suppose I'm not punished enough – so he thinks, with my precious brother to back him. Well, he can keep it. I shall never ask another shilling from him, if I have to starve."

There is a sort of pleasure in this self-abnegation – at least, during the incipient stages of it. But it is a pleasure traceable rather to revenge than virtue, and often dies out before the passion that has given it birth.

With Henry Harding it was not so short-lived. His spirit had been sorely chafed by the treatment he had received both from his sweetheart and his father. He could not separate them in his mind; and his resentment, directed against both, was strong enough to lead him to almost any resolution. He formed that of not going back to the office of the solicitor, and he kept it. It cost him a struggle, to which, perhaps, a less proud spirit would have yielded, for he was soon suffering from want of cash. His spendthrift life had suddenly come to an end, since he had no means of continuing it; and he was forced to the reflection how he could find the means of a mere living. He had changed his quarters to a cheaper hotel, but even this would require cash to pay for it, so that his circumstances were approaching desperation. What was he to do? Enlist in the army? Offer himself on board a merchant ship? Drive a cab? Carry a sandwich? Or sweep a crossing? None of these occupations were exactly suited to his taste. Better than any or all of them – go abroad. There, if it come to the worst, he could try one or the other.

But there were other chances to be found abroad; and abroad he determined upon going. Fortunately he had sufficient left to carry him across the sea, even the great Atlantic Ocean; for, if his coin had been all spent, he had still something in the shape of a valuable watch, pins, rings, and other *bijouterie*, that could be converted into currency. These would yield enough to pay his passage to any part of the New World – for he intended going

there, or to some distant land, far away from his father and Belle Mainwaring.

He had converted his chattels into cash – a thing that can be done in London in an incredibly short space of time, if we are not particular about the price. He had made a visit to the West India Docks, for the purpose of inspecting an advertised ship, and was returning home not over-satisfied either with himself or his fortunes. The berth offered him was shabby, and not cheap, and he had hesitated about accepting it. He had gone afterwards to Greenwich Park – the Elysian fields of the humble excursionist – and there, of course, partaken of tea and shrimps. It was nearly twelve at night as he dismounted from the knife-board of a Holborn 'bus, and turned down Little Queen Street on the way to his quarters in Essex Street, Strand. He had taken a Paddington omnibus as the only one plying westward at that late hour.

As he stepped into the little street his eye fell upon an oyster-shop, usually open to the latest hours of the night, and some of the earliest of the morning. Not satisfied with the Greenwich diet of tea and shrimps – long since digested – he entered the oyster-shop, and gave an order for a dozen of those delicious bivalves to be opened for him. There was another guest standing before the bar – a young man who having gone in before him, had given a similar order, and was already engaged in swallowing the shell-fish.

With the appearance of this young man Henry Harding was strangely impressed. He was handsome, of a complexion almost

olive, dark curling hair, a full round eye, and an aquiline nose – features that at once proclaimed him a foreigner. The few words to which he gave utterance confirmed it. They were spoken in very imperfect English, with an accent which appeared to be Italian. Notwithstanding a somewhat threadbare suit of clothes, his bearing told either of birth or breeding; in short, one could not have made much of a mistake in supposing him to have been brought up a gentleman.

If Henry Harding had been asked why the young man interested him, he, perhaps, could not have told. But it was his well-bred air, coupled with garments that scarce corresponded; and, above all, the idea that he was looking upon a stranger in a strange land, alone, perhaps friendless – a foreshadowing of his own future. These were the thoughts passing in his mind, which at the moment made him look with a friendly eye upon his fellow oyster-eater at the bar.

He was in the mood to have addressed him; but a certain air of seriousness in the young man's countenance, coupled with the fact of his speaking English so imperfectly, with a fear that the intrusion might be mistaken, hindered the young ex-squire of the Chilterns from taking this liberty.

The other merely glanced at him, and noticing an aristocratic face, with a Bond Street style of dress, supposed, no doubt, that he was standing beside some "swell," who had stepped out of the Casino close by. Such a character would be no company for him; and with this reflection he finished his oysters, paid for them over

the counter, and passed out into the street.

The young Englishman saw him depart with a reflection just bordering on pain. There was a face that had strangely interested him. It was not likely in the great world of London he would ever see it again. Besides, he would soon himself be beyond the confines of that world, still further lessening the chances of a re-encounter. With this thought he dismissed the stranger from his mind, paid the reckoning at the oyster-bar, and made a fresh start for his lodgings in the Strand.

He had cleared Little Queen Street, and entered the sister street of similar name. The night was a dark one, and not a soul was to be seen or met: for he was now outside the meretricious circle of which at that hour the Holborn Casino is the centre.

He had turned his face towards Lincoln's Inn Fields, as along the western edge of this square was the shortest route to Essex Street. The ponderous arch was before him, and he was proceeding quietly towards it, when, under the long, low passage, dimly lit, he perceived what appeared to be the figures of three men. One of them was apparently tipsy, the other two taking care of him.

He didn't much relish squeezing past this group; but there was no help for it, so he kept on. When close up to them he saw that the drunken man was absolutely helpless, his legs refusing to do him the slightest service, and he was only prevented from sinking down on the pavement by the support of his companions, one on each side of him. They halted under the shadow of the

archway, and did not show any signs of moving onward. Perhaps they had had a long walk since leaving their "public," and wanted a little rest. That was no business of Henry Harding's, and he was quite contented to pass on without interfering – the more so as the countenance of one of the sober parties of the trio, turned for a moment towards him as he came up, clearly counselled the shunning of its owner.

He was passing on, and had already got beyond the group, when curiosity prompted him to glance back. The face of a man so helplessly intoxicated as the one supported between the other two could not be other than a curious spectacle.

Henry Harding looked upon it. There was a lamplight near that enabled him to do so, and further to distinguish the countenance of the inebriate. It was not without an exclamation of surprise that he recognised the features which had so strangely interested him – those of the stranger late seen in the oyster-shop!

"What's this?" he exclaimed, suddenly turning upon his heel, and facing the trio. "This gentleman drunk?"

"Drunk as Bacchis!" answered one of the men. "We're tryin' to get 'im home, an' ha' been at it for the best part o' an hour."

"Indeed!"

"Yis, sir. He's had a drop too much, as ye see. He's a friend of ours, and we don't want the perlice to take him to the station."

"Of course you don't," said the young sprig of Beechwood Park, now fully comprehending the case. "Well, that's kind of you both, but, as I am also a friend of this gentleman, you had

better leave him in my charge, and save yourselves any farther trouble. Do you agree to it?"

"Agree be blowed! What do you mean?"

"This!" shouted Henry, who could no longer restrain his indignation. "This!" he repeated, delivering a blow of his stout Buckinghamshire stick upon the head of one of the supporters – "and this!" he cried thrice in rapid succession, as the stick descended on the skull of the second scoundrel, and all three, garrotters and garrotted, sank together upon the pavement.

By the merest accident in the world, a policeman appeared upon the spot. In Lincoln's Inn Fields there are no area safes, and a great scarcity of rabbit-pie. As a consequence, the guardians of the night may be seen occasionally upon their beat; and, as good-luck would have it, one, sauntering along Great Queen Street, heard the scuffle in the archway, and hastened towards the spot.

He came up in time to assist Henry Harding in securing the two garrotters, and stripping them of the spoils they had taken from the person of the stranger, of which they had already possessed themselves. All went together to the police-station, the stranger having by this time partially recovered from his intoxication —*of chloroform*– whence, in a cab, he was taken by Henry Harding to his own lodgings, and left there – with a promise on the part of his rescuer to return to him on the following day.

Chapter Fourteen
Turned Artist

A slight incident – the dropping of a pin, or the turning of a straw – may affect the whole current of a man's life. There may be a fixed fate: but if so, it often seems to be brought about, or depend upon, circumstances purely accidental. Had Henry Harding not gone home by Holborn Bars; had he not got down at the corner of Little Queen Street; had he not taken a fancy for shell-fish; had he not that day done a hundred other things, all of which may have indirectly conducted to the encounter described; – his after life might have been as different from what is to be chronicled, as if it were that of some other man.

In a week from that time he might have been on his way to the West Indies, or some part of the great American continent, perhaps never to come back; whereas in a week from that time he was sitting in a studio, with a palette on his left thumb, a brush in his right hand, and an easel in front of him, while the classic blouse of brown holland and the embroidered smoking-cap told that he had turned artist.

The change in his life's programme can be easily explained. The gentleman he had rescued from the garrotters had become his patron; and, listening to the counsels of the young Italian artist – for such was he – he had himself taken to painting as a

means of procuring his livelihood. Nor was it such a despairing adventure. He had already displayed taste in his school-drawings, and was, moreover, gifted with that aptitude for the art that usually leads to success. Almost from the first day spent in the studio he was enabled to produce sketches that could be sold; and these were followed by those "furniture pictures" which have given not only practice but material support to many a struggling artist afterwards eminent in his profession, and who otherwise might never have been heard of.

The young Italian painter – Luigi Torreani by name – was himself but a beginner; but with that talent both of conception and execution, which distinguishes the countrymen of Titian, he was rapidly rising in his profession. He had got beyond the point of painting for mere bread, and was receiving a price for his pictures that promised something more than a subsistence.

It was upon the strength of his own success that he had given counsel to his new acquaintance. He had done so, after ascertaining something of the situation and prospects of the strong, gallant youth who had done him such an essential service. Henry at the time had told him but little of his antecedents. This was not needed to a mind generous as that of Luigi Torreani, and a heart at the same time touched with a sense of gratitude. On discovering the young Englishman's project of self-banishment from his native land, he combated the idea with his counsel, and proposed, in the event of his abandoning it, to instruct him in his own art. In fine, his proposal was accepted, and Henry Harding

adopted the profession of painter.

From acquaintances thus strangely introduced to each other, the two young men, not greatly differing in years, became fast friends, sharing apartments, table, studio together, and for many months the friendly association was continued. It was interrupted only by the advice of Luigi, who, deeply interested in the success of his brother artist, became desirous that the latter should spend some time in Rome, to perfect himself in his art by contemplating those classic forms so plentiful in the ancient metropolis of the world. For himself, the young Italian needed no such suggestive models. A Roman by birth, he had commenced his studies in their midst, and had ended by transferring his practice to that metropolis where the painting of them was sure to be best paid for. The education of his pupil, then, was to be the reverse of his own. The young English gentleman accepted the advice, less from any profound love of his art or ambition to excel in it, than from a longing, such as most youths feel, to look upon Italy. Italy! the classic land of our school-boy exercises! the land of bright skies and soft summer scenes! the land of Tasso, of Ariosto, Byron, Boccaccio, and the brigands! Who does not desire to behold such a country, classically poetical in its past, romantically picturesque in its present, and, it is hoped, to be free and prosperous in its future?

Henry Harding longed to look upon this land; and mingled with his longings was a hope he might there find *Lethe*, or at least some solace for his spirit, still suffering sorely from the cruel

treatment he had received – from a double disappointment to his affection and his love. So long as he remained in England amid its *souvenirs* and scenes, these sad memories would ever remain fresh. Perhaps in a foreign land, with strange objects under his eye, strange voices sounding in his ear, he might be enabled to realise the truth of the oft-quoted adage, "Absence conquers love."

Chapter Fifteen
A Sketcher Surprised

On the road to Rome, leading out into the Campagna, a young man might have been seen wending his way towards the hill country where shoot down the spurs of the Apennines. At a glance he was not an Italian. A fine open face, with cheeks of ruddy hue, curls caressing them, of a rich auburn colour; but, above all, a frame of strong, almost herculean, build, borne forward by a free unfettered step, pronounced a son of the north – a Saxon! A portfolio under his arm, a palette carried in his left hand alongside, some half-dozen camel's-brushes, clearly proclaimed his profession – a painter in search of a subject.

There was nothing in all this to attract the attention of those he met or passed upon the route – neither the personal appearance of the painter nor the paraphernalia that declared his calling. An artist on the roads around Rome is an entity that may be often encountered – though perhaps not so often as a bandit.

If any one took notice of the individual in question, it was merely to remark that he was a stranger —*un Inglese*– and perhaps wonder why he was trudging out towards the hills, while he might be enjoying himself ten times better in the cabarets and inns of the Eternal City.

That the artist in question was "*Inglese*," no one who saw him

doubted; nor will the reader, when told that he was no other than Henry Harding.

Why he was upon a Roman instead of an English road is already known. Flung upon his own resources in the great city of London – too proud to return to his father's home, stung by what he fancied to have been a refusal to his last request – he had, under the tutelage of his Italian friend, now taken to painting as his profession. He had not stained canvas without some success – enough to justify him in following the advice of Luigi Torreani, and completing his studies under the bright skies of Italy, and amid the classic scenes of the seven-hilled city. Thither had he found his way, with no other support than the precarious earnings of his pencil. This was fully evidenced by his threadbare coat and chafed *chaussure*, as he trudged afoot along the dusty road of the Romagna.

Whither was he going? He was far enough out to have almost lost sight of the Eternal City, and those classic monuments that only give proof of its decay. These, one would think, should have been the objects of his study – the subjects upon which to perfect it. And so they had been. He had painted them one after another – portal and palace, sculptured figure and fresco, Capitol and Coliseum – till his head was tired with such art delineation; and he was now on his way to the hills, to drink from the pure fountain of Nature – to fling rock and stream and tree upon the canvas, under the light of an Italian sun, and the canopy of an azure sky.

It was his first journey to the Campagna; he was going

without a guide, only inquiring now and then for Valdiorno, a small mountain town lying near the Neapolitan frontier. To the "*sindico*" of this place he carried a letter of introduction, obtained from his son, who was the young Italian artist he had left behind him in London. But the chief object of this country excursion was to find some scene *paintable*, and worthy of being painted.

He had not made many miles along his route before he was tempted to stop, and this more than once. Every turn of the road presented him with a landscape; every peasant would have made a picture. He resisted these allurements with the thought, that these landscapes, so near to the city, might all have been sketched before; while the peasants could be caught at any time, in the streets of Rome itself, and there painted in all their picturesqueness.

On towards some shaggy hills he saw looming out in the distance; and on went he, until near the close of the day he found himself toiling up a steep ravine, whose every turn gave him a tableau worthy of being transferred to canvas, framed, and conspicuously suspended against the walls of the Royal Academy.

After a slight repast drawn from his wallet, and a smoke from his meerschaum pipe, he set about painting a scene, he had at length selected. He fought against the fatigue of his journey, for the sake of catching a magnificent mellow sunset that had welcomed his approach to the place. He had no need to add to the "composition" of his picture. Rocks, trees, cliffs,

torrents foaming over them, points of *chiaro* and *oscuro*, abruptly contrasted – all were under his eye. If there was aught wanting to give life to the landscape, it was only a few figures – animal or human – and these he could fill in according to his fancy.

"Ah," he reflected aloud, "just the scene for a band of brigands. I'd give something to have a half-dozen of them in the foreground. I could then make a picture of these fantastic Turpins drawn from real life – a thing, I take it, which has never been done before. That would be something to hang up in the Royal Academy – something worth wasting colour and canvas on. I'd give – "

"How much?" answered a voice that seemed to issue out of the rocks behind him. "How much would you give, Master Painter, for that you speak o'? If you bid high enough, I dare say I mout find the means o' accommodatin' you."

Along with the voice came the footsteps of a man – not in soft, stealthy tread, as of one approaching unawares, but with a quick thump, as the man himself dropped down from a rock above upon the little platform where the artist had planted his sticks. The latter looked up, at first in surprise, then rather in pleased admiration. He was thinking only of his art, and before him stood the very model of his imagination – a man clad in a complete suit of plush and coloured velvet, breeched, bandaged, and belted, with a plumed hat upon his head, and a short carbine across his arms – in costume and caparison the beau-ideal of a brigand. Two things alone hindered him from appearing the true

heroic type of stage representation, such as we are accustomed to see in "Mazzaroni" and the "Devil's Brother." There was a broad Saxon face, and a tongue unmistakably from the shire of Somerset. Both were so marked, that but for the velveteen knee-breeches, the waist-belt, the elaborately buttoned vest, and the plumed hat upon his head, Henry Harding might have thought himself at home, and in the presence of a man he had met before.

Ere the young artist had sufficiently recovered from his surprise to respond to the unexpected salutation, the picturesque stranger continued —

"Want to paint brigands, do ye? Well, there's a chance for ye now. The band's close by. Jess wait a bit; I'll call 'em down. Hey, there, captin!" he cried, changing his English to Italian, "ye may come on. It's only one o' them poor devils o' daubers from the city. He wants to take our likenesses. I s'pose you've no objection to his doin' it?"

Before the painter could make response, or remove his paraphernalia out of the way, the ledge he had selected for his "point of view" was crowded with figures – one and all of them so picturesquely attired, that had they stood in the Corso, or elsewhere within police protection, he would have been only too delighted to have painted them with the most Pre-Raphaelitish detail. As it was, all thoughts of art were chased out of his mind. He saw that he was encircled by banditti!

To attempt to retreat was out of the question. They were above, below, on all sides of him. Even had he been swifter than

any of the gang, their carbines were slung handy *en bandoulière*; and a volley from these would certainly have checked his flight. There was no alternative but to resign himself to his fate – which was now to be made a captive.

Chapter Sixteen
Empty Pockets

If he who had surprised the painter at his task did not present the exact classic type of the stage bandit, there was one upon the ground who did. This man stood a little in advance of the others with that easy air that betokened authority. There was no mistaking his position. He was the chief. His dress did not differ, in cut or fashion, so materially from that of his followers; it was only more costly in the material. Where their breeches were velveteen, his was of the finest silk velvet. Besides, there was a glitter about his arms and a sparkle on the clasp which held the plume in his Calabrian hat that bespoke real jewellery. His face, moreover, was not of the common cast; it was of the true Roman type, the nose and chin of exceeding prominence, with a broad oval jaw-bone indicative of determination. He might have been deemed handsome but for an expression of ferocity – animal, almost brutal – that gleamed and sparkled in his coal-black eyes. If not handsome, he was sufficiently striking, and Henry Harding might have fancied himself confronted by the renowned Fra Diavolo. Had he stepped from behind the proscenium of the scenic stage, or come bounding from a "back flat," the Transpontine spectators would have hailed him as the hero they had come to the theatre to see.

For some seconds there was silence. The first spokesman had slunk into the rear of the band; and all stood waiting for the chief to commence speech or action. The latter stood looking at the young artist, scanning him from head to foot. The scrutiny seemed to give him no great pleasure. There was not much booty to be expected in the pockets of such a threadbare coat; and a grin passed over his dark features as he pronounced, in a contemptuous tone, the word —

"*Artista*?"

"*Si, Signore*," replied the artist, with as much *sang froid* as if he had been answering an ordinary question. "At your service, if you wish to sit or stand for your portrait."

"Portrait? Bah! What care I for your chalks and ochres, signor painter? Better if you'd been a pedlar with a good fat pack. That's the sort of toys for such as we. You're from the *cittada*? What's brought you up here?"

"My legs," replied the young Englishman, thinking that a bold front might be best under the circumstances.

"*Cospetto*! I can tell that without asking. Such boots as yours don't look much like the stirrup. But come, declare yourself. What have you got in your pockets; a scudi or two, I suppose. How much, signore?"

"Three scudi."

"Hand them over."

"Here they are – you are welcome to them."

The brigand took the three coins, with as much nonchalance

as if he had been receiving them in liquidation for some service rendered.

"This all?" he asked, again surveying the artist from head to foot.

"All I have got upon me."

"But you have more in the *cittada*?"

"A little more."

"How much?"

"About four score scudi."

"*Corpo di Bacco*! a good sum; where is it lying?"

"At my lodgings."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.