

Henty George Alfred

**A Search For A Secret: A
Novel. Volume 1**



George Henty

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CHAPTER I

EARLY DAYS

There are towns over which time seems to exercise but little power, but to have passed them by forgotten, in his swift course. Everywhere else, at his touch, all is changed. Great cities rise upon the site of fishing villages; huge factories, with their smoky chimneys grow up and metamorphose quiet towns into busy hives of industry; while other cities, once prosperous and flourishing, sink into insignificance; and the passer by, as he wanders through their deserted streets, wonders and laments over the ruin which has fallen upon them.

But the towns of which I am speaking – and of which there are but few now left in England, and these, with hardly an exception, cathedral towns – seem to suffer no such change. They neither progress nor fall back. If left behind, they are not beaten in the race, for they have never entered upon it; but are content to rest under the shelter of their tall spires and towers; to seek for no change and to meet with none; but to remain beloved, as no other towns are loved, by those who have long known them – assimilating, as it were, the very natures of those who dwell in them, to their own sober, neutral tints.

In these towns, a wanderer who has left them as a boy, returning as an old, old man, will see but little change – a house gone here, another nearly similar built in its place; a greyer tint upon the stone; a tree fallen in the old close; the ivy climbing a little higher upon the crumbling wall; – these are all, or nearly all, the changes which he will see. The trains rush past, bearing their countless passengers, who so rarely think of stopping there, that the rooks, as they hold their grave conversations in their nests in the old elm-trees, cease to break off, even for a moment, at the sound of the distant whistle. The very people seem, although this is but seeming, to have changed as little as the place: the same names are over the shop doors – the boy who was at school has taken his grand-sire's place, and stands at his door, looking down the quiet street as the old man used to do before him; the dogs are asleep in the sunny corners they formerly loved; and the same horses seem to be lazily drawing the carts, with familiar names upon them, into the old market-place. The wanderer may almost fancy that he has awoke from a long, troubled dream. It is true that if he enters the little churchyard, he will see, beneath the dark shadows of the yew-trees, more gravestones than there were of old; but the names are so similar, that it is only upon reading them over, that he will find that it is true after all, and that the friends and playfellows of his childhood, the strong, merry boys, and the fair girls with sunny ringlets, sleep peacefully there. But it is not full yet; and he may hope that, when his time shall come, there may be some quiet nook found, where, even as a child, he may have fancied that he would like some day to rest.

Among these cities pre-eminent, as a type of its class, is the town in which I now sit down to recount the past events of my life, and of the lives of those most dear to me – not egotistically, I hope, nor thrusting my own story, in which, indeed, there is little enough, into view; but telling of those I have known and lived with, as I have noted the events down in my journal, and at times, when the things I speak of are related merely on hearsay, dropping that dreadful personal pronoun which will get so prominent, and telling the story as it was told to me.

Although not born at Canterbury, I look upon it as my native town, my city of adoption. My earliest remembrances are of the place; my childhood and youth were spent there; and, although I was then for a few years absent, it was for that stormy, stirring time, when life is wrapped up in persons and

not in places, when the mere scene in which the drama is played out leaves barely an impression upon the mind, so all-absorbing is the interest in the performers. That time over, I returned to Canterbury as to my home, and hope, beneath the shadow of its stately towers, to pass tranquilly down the hill of life, whose ascent I there made with such eager, strong young steps.

Dear old Canterbury! It is indeed a town to love with all one's heart, as it lies, sleeping, as it were, amidst its circle of smiling hop-covered hills, with its glorious cathedral looking so solemnly down upon it, with its quiet courts, its shady, secluded nooks and corners, its quaint, old-fashioned houses, with their many gables and projecting eaves, and its crumbling but still lofty walls, it gives me somehow the idea of a perfect haven of rest and peace. It, like me, has seen its stormy times: Briton, Dane, and Saxon have struggled fiercely before its walls. It, too, has had its proud dreams, its lofty aspirations; but they are all over now, and it is, like myself, contented to pass its days in quiet, resting upon its old associations, and with neither wish nor anticipation of change in the tranquil tenour of its way.

I was not, as I have said, born in the town, but went there very young – so young that I have no remembrance of any earlier time.

We lived in a large, rambling, old-fashioned house in a back lane. In a little court before it stood some lime-trees, which, if they helped to make the front darker and more dismal than it would otherwise have been, had the good effect of shutting it out from the bad company into which it had fallen.

It had at one time been a place of great pretension, and belonged, doubtless, to some country magnate, and before the little houses in the narrow lane had sprung up and hemmed it in, it may have had a cheerful appearance; but, at the time I speak of, the external aspect was undeniably gloomy. But behind it was very different. There was a lawn and large garden, at the end of which the Stour flowed quietly along, and we children were never tired of watching the long streamer-like green weeds at the bottom waving gently in the current, and the trout darting here and there among them, or lying immovable, apparently watching us, until at the slightest noise or motion they would dart away too quickly for the eye to follow them.

Inside, it was a glorious home for us, with its great old-fashioned hall with dark wainscoting and large stags' heads all round it, which seemed to be watching us children from their eyeless sockets; and its vast fireplace, with iron dogs, where, in the old days, a fire sufficient for the roasting of a whole bullock, might have been piled up; with its grand staircase, with heavy oak balustrades, lit by a great window large enough for an ordinary church; with its long passages and endless turnings and backstairs in unexpected places; with all its low, quaint rooms of every shape except square, and its closets nearly as large as rooms.

Oh, it was a delightful house! But very terrible at dusk. Then we would not have gone along alone those long, dark passages for worlds; for we knew that the bogies, and other strange things of which our old nurse told us, would be sure to be lurking and upon the watch.

It was a wonderful house for echoes, and at night we would steal from our beds and creep to the top of the grand staircase, and listen, with hushed breath, to the almost preternaturally loud tick of the old clock in the hall, which seemed to us to get louder and louder, till at last the terrors of the place would be almost too much for us, and, at the sound of some mouse running behind the wainscoting, we would scamper off to our beds, and bury our heads beneath the clothes, falling into a troubled sleep, from which we woke, with terrified starts, until the welcome approach of day, when, as the sun shone brightly in, we would pluck up courage and laugh at our night's fright.

Of my quite young days I have not much to say. My brother Harry, who was two years older than I, went to the King's School; and Polly – who was as much my junior – and I were supposed to learn lessons from our mother. Poor mamma! not much learning, I think, did we get from her. She was always weak and ailing, and had but little strength or spirits to give to teaching us. When I was twelve, and Polly consequently ten, we had a governess in of a day, to teach us and keep us in order;

but I am afraid that she found it hard work, for we were sadly wild, noisy girls – at least, this was the opinion of our unmarried aunts, who came to stay periodically with us.

I have not yet spoken of my father, my dear, dear father. How we loved him, and how he loved us, I cannot even now trust myself to write. As I sit at my desk his portrait hangs on the wall before me, and he seems to be looking down with that bright genial eye, that winning smile which he wore in life. Not only by us was he loved, almost adored, but all who came in contact with him were attracted in a similar way. To rich or poor, ill or in health, to all with whom he was in any way associated, he was friend and adviser. A large man and somewhat portly, with iron-grey hair, cut short, and brushed upright off his forehead, a rather dark complexion, a heavy eyebrow, a light-blue eye, very clear and penetrating, and the whole face softened and brightened by his genial smile. Very kind and sympathetic to the poor, the sick, and the erring; pitilessly severe upon meanness, hypocrisy, and vice. He was a man of great scientific attainments, and his study was crowded with books and instruments which related to his favourite pursuits. Upon the shelves were placed models of steam-engines, electrical machines, galvanic batteries, air-pumps, microscopes, chemical apparatus, and numberless other models and machinery of which we could not even guess the uses. Thick volumes of botanical specimens jostled entomological boxes and cases, butterfly-nets leant in the corner with telescopes, retorts stood beneath the table, the drawers of which were filled with a miscellaneous collection indescribable.

With us children he was firm, yet very kind, ever ready to put aside his work to amuse us, especially of a winter's evening, when, dinner over, he always went into his study, to which we would creep, knock gently at the door, and when allowed to enter, would sit on stools by his side, looking into the fire, while he told us marvellous tales of enchanters and fairies. It was at these times, when we had been particularly good – or at least when he, who was as glad of an excuse to amuse us as we were to be amused, pretended that we had been so – that he would take down his chemicals, or electrical apparatus, and show us startling or pretty experiments, ending perhaps by entrapping one of us into getting an unexpected electric shock, and then sending us all laughing up to bed.

We always called papa Dr. Ashleigh in company. It was one of mamma's fancies: she called him so herself, and was very strict about our doing the same upon grand occasions. We did not like it, and I don't think papa did either, for he would often make a little funny grimace, as he generally did when anything rather put him out; but as mamma set her mind upon it so much, he never made any remark or objection. He was very, very kind to her, and attentive to her wishes, and likes and dislikes; but their tastes and characters were as dissimilar as it was possible for those of any two persons to be.

She was very fond of papa, and was in her way proud to see him so much looked up to and admired by other people; but I do not think that she appreciated him for himself as it were, and would have been far happier had he been a common humdrum country doctor. She could not understand his devotion to science, his eager inquiry into every novelty of the day, and his disregard for society in the ordinary sense of the word; still less could she understand his untiring zeal in his profession. Why he should be willing to be called up in the middle of a winter's night, get upon his horse, and ride ten miles into the country on a sudden summons to some patient, perhaps so poor that to ask payment for his visit never even entered into the Doctor's mind, was a thing she could not understand. Home, and home cares occupied all her thoughts, and it was to her inexpressibly annoying, when, after taking extreme care to have the nicest little dinner in readiness for his return from work, he would come in an hour late, be perfectly unconcerned at his favourite dish being spoilt, and, indeed, be so completely absorbed in the contemplation of some critical case in his day's practice, as not even to notice what there was for dinner, but to eat mechanically whatsoever was put before him.

Mamma must have been a very pretty woman when she married Dr. Ashleigh. Pretty is exactly the word which suits her style of face. A very fair complexion, a delicate colour, a slight figure, light hair, which then fell in curls, but which she now wore in bands, with a pretty apology for a cap on the back of her head. She had not much colour left when I first remember her, unless it came in a

sudden flush; but she was still, we thought, very pretty, although so delicate-looking. She lay upon the sofa most of the day, and would seldom have quitted it, had she not been so restlessly anxious about the various household and nursery details, that every quarter of an hour she would be off upon a tour of inspection and supervision through the house. She was very particular about our dress and manners, and I am sure loved us very much; but from her weak state of health she could not have us long with her at a time.

It was one bright summer afternoon, I remember well, when I was rather more than fourteen years old, we had finished our early dinner, Harry had started for school, and we had taken our books and gone out to establish ourselves in our favourite haunt, the summer-house at the end of the garden. This summer-house was completely covered with creepers, which climbed all over the roof, and hung in thick festoons and clusters, almost hiding the woodwork, and making it a perfect leafy bower; only towards the river we kept it clear. It was so charming to sit there with our toys or our work and watch the fish, the drifting weeds and fallen leaves, to wonder which would get out of sight first, and whether they would catch in the wooden piles of the bridge, – for there was a bridge over from our garden into the fields beyond, where our cow Brindle was kept, and where our horses were sometimes turned out to graze, and make holiday. It was a very happy and peaceful spot. When we were little, the summer-house was our fairy bower; here we could play with our dolls, and be queens and princesses without fear of interruption, and sometimes when Harry was with us, we would be Robinson Crusoes wrecked on a desert island; here we would store up provisions, and make feasts, here we would find footprints in the sand, and here above all we would wage desperate battles with imaginary fleets of canoes full of savages endeavouring to cross the stream. Harry would stand courageously in front, and we girls carefully concealing ourselves from the enemy, would keep him supplied with stones from the magazine, with which he would pour volleys into the water, to the imaginary terror of the savages, and the real alarm of our friends the fish. With what zeal did we throw ourselves into these fights, with what excited shouts and cries, and what delight we felt when Harry proclaimed the victory complete and the enemy in full flight!

As time went on, and the dolls were given up, and we could no longer believe in savages, and began to think romping and throwing stones unladylike, although at times very pleasant, the summer-house became our reading-room, and at last, after we had a governess, our schoolroom in fine weather. This was not obtained without some opposition upon the part of mamma, who considered it as an irregular sort of proceeding; but we coaxed papa into putting in a good word for us, and then mamma, who was only too glad to see us happy, gave in at once. We had but just gone out, and after a look down at the river and the fish, and across at the pretty country beyond, had opened our books with a little sigh of regret, when we heard a footstep coming down the garden and to our surprise found it was papa.

"Now girls," he said, "put on your things as quickly as you can. I am going over to Mr. Harmer at Sturry, and will take you with me. First though, we must ask mamma's leave. I have no doubt Miss Harrison here, will be as glad of a holiday as you are."

Mamma, however, although she seldom opposed any of papa's plans for our amusement, raised many objections. Indeed, I had for some time past noticed that she did not like our visiting at Harmer Place. Upon this occasion she was particularly averse to our going, and said that I "was getting too old to associate with a person of such extraordinary antecedents as – ."

We did not hear who the person was, for papa broke in more sternly than I had ever before heard him speak to mamma, and said that "he differed from her entirely: for his part he could see no harm whatever in our going, and that, at any rate until we were of an age to judge for ourselves, no question of the sort could arise."

Mamma, directly she saw he was in earnest, said no more, and we set out soon afterwards, with the understanding that we should most probably not be back until evening.

Although neither Polly nor I ever made any remark to each other about that conversation, we – or at least I can answer for myself – were not the less astonished at it. It seemed perfectly inexplicable to me. What objection could there be to our going to the Harmers? I was, as I have said, past fourteen, and was beginning to think and reason about all sorts of things, and this was a problem which I tried in vain for a long time to solve to my satisfaction. How I pondered the matter over in every light, but ever without success. Mamma had said it was a person. Now, person generally means a woman, and the only women at Harmer Place were the two Miss Harmers. Had it been a principle mamma objected to, I could have understood it, for the Miss Harmers were bigoted Catholics. Not that that would have made any difference with papa, who looked at these matters with a very latitudinarian eye. "In my opinion," I have heard him say, "the sect to which a man belongs makes but little difference, if he does but do his best according to his belief."

And I remember that in after years, when we had suffered much, he warned us not to blame a creed for the acts of its professors. "History has shown," he would say, "that a bigot, whether he be Catholic, Protestant, or Mussulman, will be equally a cruel persecutor of others, equally ready to sacrifice everything which he believes to stand in the way of his Church."

I mention this here because I should be very sorry that the feelings of any one who may ever come to read this story of mine should be hurt, or that it should be taken to be an attack or even an implication against a particular form of worship.

I knew then that although papa objected to the extreme opinions which the Miss Harmers held, and which had been caused by the exceptional life which they had led, still the antecedents, to which mamma alluded, could be no question of religion. And yet the only other female at Harmer Place was Sophy Needham, the pretty girl we so often met there. She was an orphan village child, to whom Mr. Harmer had taken such a fancy that he had sent her, at his own expense, to a London school, and had her constantly staying at the house with him. But, of course, it could not be Sophy; for I was quite sure that the fact of her having been a village girl would not make the slightest difference in either papa's or mamma's eyes, so far as our associating with her went; and in other respects there could be no objection, for she was a particularly quiet, retiring girl, and was two years older than myself.

The objection, then, did not appear to apply to any one at Harmer Place, and I puzzled myself in vain upon the subject; and indeed it was not for some years afterwards that the mystery was solved, or that I found out that it was indeed Sophy Needham to whom mamma had alluded. There is no reason why I should make a mystery of it in this journal of mine, which will be more easily understood by making the matter clear at once, and I will therefore, before I go on with my own story, relate the history of the Harmers as nearly as I can as it was told to me.

CHAPTER II

THE HARMERS OF HARMER PLACE

The Harmers of Harmer Place, although of ancient descent, could yet hardly be ranked among the very old Kentish families, for they could trace back their history very little beyond the commencement of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, of pious and Protestant memory. About that period it is ascertained that they were small landed proprietors, probably half gentry, half farmers. All documentary and traditional history goes to prove that the Harmers of those days were a stiff-necked race, and that their consciences were by no means of the same plastic nature as those of the great majority of their neighbours. They could not, for the life of them, see why – because the Royal family had all of a sudden come to the conclusion that the old Roman religion, in which their fore-fathers had for so many centuries worshipped, was after all wrong, that therefore the whole nation was bound to make the same discovery at the same moment.

So the Harmers clung to the old faith, and were looked upon with grievous disfavour in consequence by the authorities for the time being. Many were the domiciliary visits paid them, and grievous were the fines inflicted upon them for nonconformity. Still, whether from information privately sent to them previous to these researches, or whether from the superior secrecy and snugness of their "Priest's chamber," certain it is, that although frequently denounced and searched, no priest or emissary of papacy was ever found concealed there; and so, although constantly harassed and vexed, they were suffered to remain in possession of their estate.

As generation of Harmers succeeded generation, they continued the same stiff-necked race, clinging to their old tenets, and hardening their hearts to all inducements to desert them. Over and over again they went through "troubulous times," especially when those God-fearing and enlightened Puritans domineered it over England. In after reigns difficulties arose, but the days of persecution were over then, and they had nothing to undergo comparable to their former trials.

It would have been naturally supposed that as at the commencement of the reign of Elizabeth the Harmers were by no means a wealthy race, they would speedily have been shorn of all the little property they then possessed. But it was not so. The more they were persecuted so much the more they flourished, and from mere farmers they speedily rose to the rank of county families.

One reason, doubtless, for their immunity from more than comparatively petty persecutions, such as fines and imprisonments, was, that the Harmers never took any part in political affairs; neither in plots, nor risings, nor civil wars, were they ever known actively to interfere.

As the Harmers were in other respects an obstinate, quarrelsome race, stubborn in will, strong in their likes and dislikes, it was singular that they should never have actively bestirred themselves in favour of the cause which they all had so strongly at heart. The popular belief on the matter was, that a settled and traditional line of policy had been recommended, and enforced upon the family, by their priests; namely, to keep quite neutral in politics, in order that there might be at least one house in the country – and that, from its proximity to the sea-coast, peculiarly suitable to the purpose, – where, in cases of necessity, a secure hiding-place could be relied on. Mother Church is very good to her obedient children; and if the Harmers gave up their personal feelings for her benefit, and sheltered her ministers in time of peril, she no doubt took care that in the long run they should not be losers. And so, while their Roman Catholic neighbours threw themselves into plots and parties, and lost house and land, and not uncommonly life, the Harmers rode quietly through the gale, thriving more and more under the small persecutions they suffered for the faith's sake. And thus it happened that going into troubles as small proprietors in the reign of Elizabeth, they came out of them in that of George, owners of a large estate and a rambling old mansion in every style of architecture.

After that date, persecution having ceased, and "Priests' chambers" being no longer useful, the Harmers ceased to enlarge their boundaries, and lived retired lives on their property, passing a considerable portion of their time on the Continent.

Robert Harmer had, contrary to the usual custom of his ancestors, six children – four sons and two daughters. Edward was, of course, intended to inherit the family property, and was brought up in accordance with the strictest traditions of his race; Robert was also similarly educated, in order to be fitted to take his brother's place should Edward not survive his father, or die leaving no heirs; Gregory was intended for the priesthood; and Herbert, the youngest of all, was left to take his chance in any position which the influence of his family or Church might obtain for him.

Herbert Harmer, however, was not so ready as the rest of his family to submit his judgment without question to that of others; and having, when about sixteen, had what he conceived an extremely heavy and unfair penance imposed upon him for some trifling offence, he quitted his home, leaving a letter behind him stating his intention of never returning to it. Herbert Harmer was not of the stuff of which a docile son of Holy Church is made; of a warm and affectionate disposition, and a naturally buoyant, joyous frame of mind, the stern and repressive discipline to which he was subjected, and the monotonous existence he led in his father's house, seemed to him the height of misery.

The lad, when he turned his back on home, knew little of the world. He had lived the life almost of a recluse, never stirring beyond the grounds of the mansion except to attend mass at the Roman Catholic chapel at Canterbury, and this only upon grand occasions, as the family confessor, who acted also as his tutor, resided in the village, and ordinarily performed the service at the chapel attached to the place.

Companions he had none. Gregory, the brother next to him in age, was away in Italy studying for the priesthood; Cecilia and Angela he had seen but seldom, as they also were abroad, being educated in a convent; Edward and Robert were young men nearly ten years older than himself, and were when at home his father's companions rather than his, and both were of grave taciturn disposition, ascetic and bigoted even beyond the usual Harmer type.

Thrown therefore almost entirely upon his own resources, Herbert had sought what companionship he best could. Books, first and best; but of these his stock was limited. Religious and controversial treatises, church histories, and polemical writings formed the principal part of the library, together with a few volumes of travel and biography which had somehow found their way there. On a library so limited as this the boy could not employ his whole time, but had to seek amusement and exercise out of doors, and the only companion he had there, was perhaps of all others the very one with whom he would have been most strictly forbidden to associate, had their intimacy been guessed at.

Robert Althorpe was the son of a tenant on the estate, and was a man of thirty or thereabouts. Originally a wild, reckless lad, he had, as many an English boy has done before and since, ran away to sea, and, after nearly fifteen years absence, had lately returned with only one arm, having lost the other in a naval engagement. On his return he had been received with open arms by his father, as at that time (that is, in the year 1795) all England was wild with our naval glory. And now Robert Althorpe passed his time, sitting by the fire smoking, or wandering about to relate his tales of adventure among the farmhouses of the country, at each of which he was received as a welcome guest.

The sailor took a particular fancy to young Herbert Harmer, whose ignorance of the world and eager desire to hear something of it, and whose breathless attention to his yarns, amused and gratified him. On many a summer afternoon, then, when Herbert had finished his prescribed course of study, he would slip quietly away to meet Robert Althorpe, and would sit for hours under the trees listening to tales of the world and life of which he knew so little. Robert had in his period of service seen much; for those were stirring times. He had taken part in the victories of Howe and Jervis, and in the capture of the numerous West Indian isles. He had fought, too, under the invincible Nelson at the Nile, in which battle he had lost his arm. He had been stationed for two years out on the Indian

coast, and Herbert above all loved to hear of that wonderful country, then the recent scene of the victories of Clive and Hastings.

When therefore he left his home, the one fixed idea in Herbert Harmer's mind was, that first of all he would go to sea, and that then he would some day visit India; both which resolutions he carried into effect.

It was some ten years after, when the memory of the young brother of whom they had seen so little had nearly faded from the minds of his family, that a letter arrived from him, addressed to his father, but which was opened by his brother Edward as the head of the house, the old man having been three years before laid in the family vault. Gregory too was dead, having died years previously of a fever contracted among the marshes near Rome. The contents of the letter, instead of being hailed with the delight with which news from a long lost prodigal is usually greeted, were received with unmingled indignation and horror.

A solemn family conclave was held in the old library, Edward Harmer at the head of the table, Father Paul at the foot, and the contents of the letter were taken into formal consideration. A joint answer was then drawn up, stating the horror and indignation with which his communication had been received – that the anathema had been passed against him, that to them he was dead for ever, and that they regretted that he had ever been born at all.

All this was expressed at great length, and with that exceedingly complicated bitterness of cursing, which is a characteristic of the Roman Church when roused. At the end, each of the family signed his or her name, and the priest added his, with a cross affixed there to, as a token for ever against him.

The contents of the letter which had caused all this commotion of spirit, were briefly as follows.

Herbert had gone to sea, and had for two years voyaged to different parts of the world. At the end of that time he had arrived in India, and there leaving his ship, had determined to cast his lot. After various employments, he had finally obtained a situation as a clerk to a planter up the country, whose daughter he had three years afterwards married; he was now doing well, and hoped that his father would forgive his having ran away from home.

So far the letter was satisfactory enough, it was the final paragraph which had caused the explosion of family wrath against him – namely, that his wife was a Protestant, and that having carefully examined the Bible with her, he had come to the conclusion that the Reformed Church more closely carried out the precepts and teachings of that book than his own. That he was afraid this would prove a serious annoyance to his father; but that, as he was so far away, and should never be likely to return to obtrude the new religion he had adopted upon them, he hoped that it would be no bar to his continuing an amicable correspondence with them.

This hope was, as has been seen, not destined to be realized. The answer was sealed and duly sent off, and henceforth Herbert Harmer, as far as his family was concerned, ceased to have any existence. It was nearly twenty years before they again heard of him, and then the news came that he had returned to England, a widower, bringing his only son, a young man of about twenty-one years old, with him; that he had purchased a house in the neighbourhood of London, and that he did not intend to return to India.

Very shortly after his return, a letter from him was received by his elder brother, but immediately it was opened, and the first line showed from whom it came, it was closed unread, resealed, and returned to the writer.

During the thirty years which Herbert Harmer had been absent, the old place had certainly not improved. Edward and Robert had both been married, but were, like their brother, widowers. Edward never had children. Robert had several born to him, but all had died quite young. The sisters had remained single.

It was a gloomy house in those days. They all lived together there. Father Paul was long since dead, and Father Gabriel literally reigned in his stead – a man even more gloomy and bigoted than

his predecessors – chosen probably on that account, as being in keeping with the character of the people to whom he ministered. An unhappy family; unhappy in their lives and dispositions, unhappy in the view they had taken of religion and its duties, very unhappy – and this was the only count to which they themselves would have pleaded guilty – very unhappy because the old line of Harmer would die with them, and that there was none of the name to inherit after them; for that Herbert the apostate should succeed them, that a Protestant Harmer should dwell where his Catholic ancestors had so long lived, was never even for a moment discussed as a possibility: the very idea would have been a desecration, at which their dead fathers would have moved in their graves. Better, a thousand times better, that the old place should go to strangers. And so Edward's will was made; everything was done that could be done, and they dwelt in gloomy resignation, waiting for the end.

That end was to come to some of them sooner than they expected.

Edward and Robert Harmer had one interest, one worldly amusement, in which they indulged. As young men they had been for some time together at Genoa, and in that town of mariners they had become passionately attached to the sea. This taste they had never lost, and they still delighted occasionally to go out for a day's sailing, in a small pleasure yacht, which they kept at the little fishing-village of Herne Bay. She was an open boat, of about eight tons, and was considered a good sea-boat for her size. In this, with two men to sail her, under the command of an old one-armed sailor, whom they employed because he had once lived on the estate, they would go out for hours, once a week or so; not on fine sunny days – in them they had no pleasure – but when the wind blew fresh, and the waves broke a tawny yellow on the sand, and the long banks off the coast were white with foaming breakers. It was a strange sight in such weather, to see the two men, now from fifty to sixty years old, and very similar in face and figure, taking their places in the stern of their little craft, while the boatmen, in their rough-weather coats and fearnought hats, hoisted the sails and prepared for sea.

Very quiet they would sit, while the spray dashed over them, and the boat tore across the surface of the water, with a smile half glad, half defiant, on their dark features, till the one-armed captain would say, touching his hat, "It is getting wilder, your honours; I think we had better put about." Then they would give an assenting gesture, and the boat's head would be turned to shore, where they would arrive, wet through and storm-beaten, but with a deep joy in their hearts, such as they experienced at no other time.

But once they went out, and came back alive no more. It happened thus. It was the 3rd of March, and the morning was overcast and dull; there was wind, though not strong, coming in short sudden puffs, and then dying away again. The brothers started early, and drove over, through the village of Herne, to the little fishing-hamlet in the bay, and stopped at the cottage of the captain, as he termed himself, of their little yacht. The old sailor came out to the door.

"You are not thinking of going out to-day, your honours, are you?"

"Why not?" Edward Harmer asked; "don't you think there will be wind enough?"

"Aye, aye, your honour, wind enough, and more than enough before long; there is a gale brewing up there;" and the old man shaded his eyes with his remaining hand, and looked earnestly at the clouds.

"Pooh, pooh, man!" Robert Harmer said; "there is no wind to speak of yet, although I think with you that it may come on to blow as the sun goes down. What then? It is nearly easterly, so if we sail straight out we can always turn and run back again before the sea gets up high enough to prevent us. You know we are always ready to return when you give the word."

The old sailor made no further remonstrance, but summoning the two young men who generally accompanied them, he busied himself in carrying down the oars, and making preparations to launch the little boat which was to carry them to where the yacht was moored about a hundred yards out, with many quiet disapproving shakes of his head as he did so. They were soon in, and launched through the waves, which were breaking with a long, heavy, menacing roar. It was not rough yet, but even in the quarter of an hour which had elapsed between their arrival at the village, and reaching the side of the yacht, the aspect of the weather had changed much; the gusts of wind came more frequently,

and with far greater force, whitening the surface of the water, and tearing off the tops of the waves in sheets of spray. The dull heavy clouds overhead were beginning to break up suddenly, as if stirred by some mighty force within themselves, great openings and rents seemed torn asunder in the dark curtain, and then as suddenly closed up again; but through these momentary openings, the scud could be seen flying rapidly past in the higher regions of the air.

On reaching the side of the yacht, which was rolling heavily on the rising waves, the one-armed sailor again glanced at the brothers to see if they noticed these ominous signs, and if they made any change in their determination; but they gave no signs of doing so. Their faces were both set in that expression of stern pleasure which they always wore on occasions like this, and with another disapproving shake of his head, even more decided than those in which he had before indulged, he turned to assist the men in fastening the boat they had come in to the moorings to await their return, in loosing the sails, and taking a couple of reefs in them, and preparing for a start.

In another five minutes the little craft was far out at sea, ploughing her way through the ever increasing waves, dashing them aside from her bows in sheets of spray, and leaving a broad white track behind her.

The wind was getting up every minute, and blew with a hoarse roar across the water.

Before they had been gone fifteen minutes, the old sailor felt that it was indeed madness to go farther. He saw that the force of the wind was already more than the boat could bear, and was momentarily increasing, and that the sea was fast getting up under its power.

But as his counsel had been already once disregarded, he determined to let the first order for return come from the brothers, and he glanced for a moment from the sails and the sea to the two men sitting beside him. There was no thought of turning back there. Their lips were hard set, yet half smiling; their eyes wide open, as if to take in the tumultuous joy of the scene; their hands lay clenched on their knees. They had evidently no thought of danger, no thought of anything but deep, wild pleasure.

The old sailor bit his lips. He looked again over the sea, he looked at the sails, and at the lads crouched down in the bow with consternation strongly expressed on their faces; he glanced at the dark green water, rushing past the side, and sometimes as she lay over combing in over the gunwale; he felt the boat quiver under the shock as each succeeding wave struck her, and he knew she could bear no more. He therefore again turned round to the impassive figures beside him, and made his usual speech.

"Your honours, it is time to go about."

But this time so absorbed were they in their sensations, that they did not hear him, and he had to touch them to attract their notice, and to shout in their ears, "Your honours, we must go about."

They started at the touch, and rose like men waked suddenly from a dream. They cast a glance round, and seemed to take in for the first time the real state of things, the raging wind, the flying scud, the waves which rose round the boat, and struck her with a force that threatened to break her into fragments. And then Edward said, "Yes! by all means, if indeed it is not already too late. God forgive us for bringing you out into it; *peccavi, culpa mea.*" And then the brothers, influenced not by fear for themselves, but for the lives of those whom they had brought into danger, commenced rapidly uttering, in a low voice, the prayers of their Church for those in peril.

The prayer was never to be finished. The men sprang with alacrity to the ropes when the order was given, "Prepare to go about;" but whether their fingers were numb, or what it was which went wrong, no one will ever know. The boat obeyed her rudder, and came up into the wind. There was a momentary lull, and then as her head payed round towards the shore, a fresh gust struck her with even greater force than ever. Some rope refused to run, it was but for an instant, but that instant sealed the fate of the boat; over she lay till her sail all but touched the water, and the sea poured in over her side. For a moment she seemed to try to recover herself, and then a wild cry went up to heaven, and the boat lay bottom upwards in the trough of the waves.

CHAPTER III

"L'HOMME PROPOSE, DIEU DISPOSE."

Mr. Herbert Harmer was sitting at breakfast reading the *Times*, – a tall, slight man, of from forty-five to fifty, with a benevolent expressive face, very sunburnt; a broad forehead, a well-defined mouth, and a soft, thoughtful eye – careless as to attire, as most Anglo-Indians are, and yet, in appearance as in manner, an unmistakable gentleman.

Opposite to him sat his son, good-looking, but not so prepossessing a man as his father. He was about twenty-two, and looked, contrary to what might have been expected from his birth and bringing up in a hot climate, younger than he really was. His complexion was very fair, an inheritance probably from his mother, as all the Harmers were dark: his face, too, was much less bronzed than his father's, the year he had spent in England having nearly effaced the effects of the Indian sun. He was of about middle height, and well formed; but he had a languid, listless air, which detracted much from the manliness of his appearance. His face was a good-looking, almost a handsome one, and yet it gave the impression of there being something wanting. That something was character. The mouth and chin were weak and indecisive – not absolutely bad, only weak, – but it was sufficient to mar the general effect of his face.

He was toying with a spoon, balancing it on the edge of an empty coffee cup, when a sudden exclamation from his father startled him, and the spoon fell with a crash.

"What is the matter?"

Mr. Harmer gave no answer for some time, but continued to read in silence the paragraph which had so strangely excited him. He presently laid the paper down on his knees, seemed lost for some time in deep thought, and then took out his handkerchief and blew his nose violently.

"My dear father," the young man said, for once fairly roused by all this emotion and mystery, "what in the name of goodness is the matter? You quite alarm me. The bank has not broken, has it? or anything terrible happened?"

"A very sad affair, Gerald; a very sad affair. Your uncles are both drowned."

"By Jove!"

This being the only appropriate remark that occurred to Gerald Harmer, there was silence again; and then, seeing that his father was not disposed to say more, the young man stretched out his hand for the paper, and read the paragraph which contained the intelligence.

"Appalling Accident On The Kentish Coast. – The neighbourhood of Canterbury has been thrown into a state of consternation by an accident which has deprived one of the oldest and most highly-respected families in the county of its heads. The two Messrs. Harmer, of Harmer Place, near Canterbury, had rashly ventured out from Herne Bay, with three boatmen, in a small yacht belonging to them, just before the awful tempest, which while we write is still raging, broke upon the coast. The storm came on so rapidly that it is supposed that they were unable to return. At present nothing certain is known concerning the catastrophe; but late in the afternoon, a small black object was observed by one of the Whitstable coast-guard men, drifting past at a considerable distance from shore. A telescope being brought to bear upon it, it was at once seen to be either a large spar or a boat bottom upwards, with a human figure still clinging to it. In spite of the fury of the gale, a band of noble fellows put off in one of the large fishing-boats, and succeeded in bringing off the only survivor of the five men who had embarked in the ill-fated craft. He proved to be the sailor who generally managed Mr. Harmer's little yacht. He is a one-armed man, and this fact, singularly enough, was the means of his life

being saved; for he had succeeded in fastening the hook at the end of his wooden arm so firmly in the keel of the yacht, that, even after his strength had failed, and he could no longer have clung on, this singular contrivance remained secure, and kept him in his place, in spite of all the violence of the waves. He was nearly insensible when first rescued, and still lies in a precarious state, and has not yet been able to give any details of the mournful catastrophe. The bodies of the elder Mr. Harmer, and of one of the boatmen, were washed ashore this morning, and experienced sailors anticipate that the remaining bodies will come ashore with this evening's tide. Several men are on the look-out for them. The Harmers of Harmer Place are one of the oldest of the Kentish families, and were strict adherents to the Romish persuasion. It is believed that no male heir remains, and it is confidently stated that the large property will go eventually towards the aggrandisement of the Church to which they belonged."

"Is that last part true?" Gerald asked. "Do we get the property, or does it go to the priests?"

"We shall have none of it, Gerald: of that you may be quite sure. The priests have taken good care of that point. They would never allow the property to fall into Protestant hands if they could help it; and my poor brothers were, as far as I can hear, mere puppets in their hands. No, there is not the least chance of that. I do not say that it would not have been useful had it been otherwise; for, as you know, owing to the troubles and riots I lost a good deal of money the last three years we were in India; and although I have enough left for us to live upon comfortably, Harmer Place would have been no bad addition. However, that was not to be. I have always known that there was not be the slightest probability of such a thing, so I shall feel no disappointment about the matter."

"Do you mean to go down to the funeral?" Gerald asked.

"Yes. Yes, I shall go, certainly. My poor brothers and I have never been friends; have not seen each other for thirty years; indeed, even as a boy I saw next to nothing of them; however, the least I can do is to follow them to the grave. I shall go down to-morrow." After a pause, Mr. Harmer added, "I shall get Ransome to go down with me to be present at the reading of the will. I know it is of no use, as everything is sure to be done in legal form; still, as I have no desire to lose even the remotest chance of saving from the priests a property that has been in the hands of the family for centuries, I will take every possible precaution. I shall therefore take Ransome down with me. I think you may as well stay here until I return: it will be a painful and unpleasant business."

Gerald had not the least wish to go. "He saw no advantage in putting himself in the way of being snubbed, perhaps insulted, and only to see a fine property that ought to come to them handed over to found monasteries and convents."

So on the next morning Herbert Harmer, or Mr. Harmer, as he should now be called, took his seat on the top of the Canterbury coach, with Mr. Ransome, his solicitor, a shrewd man of business, beside him.

It was late in the evening when the coach drew up at the "Fountain," at that time one of the most famous posting-inns in England.

"You stop here to-night, gentlemen?" the landlord asked.

"This gentleman will stop here," Mr. Harmer answered. "I want a conveyance in half an hour's time to take me on to Harmer Place."

The two gentlemen entered the hotel, and had some dinner, and then when the vehicle which was to convey him was announced to be in readiness, Mr. Harmer prepared to start, saying, "I am afraid I shall meet no warm welcome, Ransome. I think you may as well order a bed-room for me; very likely I shall return here to-night. If I do not, come over early to-morrow morning."

Mr. Harmer leaned gloomily back in the carriage as it passed out through the town on to the road to Sturry, and mused sadly about old times. How different, and yet in some respects how similar, was his position now to what it was when he last trod that road thirty years back. Then, no one had loved him; his absence would be little missed, and even less regretted. And now, when he returned to

his old home after so long an absence, he could assuredly expect to be received with no pleasure, with no warm welcome. His sisters he remembered but faintly; he had not seen them more than three or four times, and they were then slim, pale girls, unnaturally constrained in manner, with thin pinched lips and downcast eyes. It was a short drive: in a quarter of an hour or so they passed through the lodge-gates, the gravel crunched under the wheels for another minute or two, and then there was a stop. Mr. Harmer alighted. The front of the house was dark, not a single light gleamed in any of the windows, all was hushed and quiet. He pulled at the great bell; it sounded with a loud empty clang, which seemed to grate unnaturally in the still night air.

"Stop here," he said to the driver. "I may return in a quarter of an hour."

The door was opened and a faint light streamed out. "Who is it?" a voice asked.

"Mr. Herbert Harmer," he said, entering. There was a slight exclamation of astonishment, and then the door closed behind him. Mr. Harmer looked round; the old hall, seen by the faint light which the servant carried in his hand, was even blacker and more gloomy than he remembered it as a boy. He followed the man, who in silence led the way across it to a small sitting-room, and who, lighting some candles standing on the mantelpiece, then withdrew, saying he would inform his mistresses that Mr. Harmer was here.

It was some minutes before Herbert Harmer heard any other sound than the ticking of a clock against the wall, then the door opened and his two sisters entered, not quite so tall as he had expected to see them, not perhaps so old, and yet with faces which disappointed him, faces which no human love had ever brightened, no loving fingers caressingly stroked, no lover's lips ever kissed. Faces expressing an abnegation of self, indeed, but without that love and charity for others which should have taken the place of self. Faces thin and pale, as by long vigil and fasting; and eyes which seemed at times to reach your very thoughts, and then to droop to avoid the answering glance which might seek to fathom theirs. Habitually, perhaps from a long residence in convents abroad, their heads were slightly bent, and their eyes fixed on the ground, while their arms lay usually folded one on the other. Both were singular instances of the manner in which natures, naturally fiery and wilful, can be completely subdued and kept down by severe discipline and long training, and of how a warm and perhaps affectionate disposition can be warped and constrained by the iron trammels of an ascetic and joyless life.

When they had entered and the door was closed, they stood side by side in exactly the same attitude, apparently not looking at their brother, but waiting for him to speak. As he did not, Cecilia the eldest broke the silence in a harsh, monotonous voice, speaking like one who has learnt a lesson, and who only delivers what she has got by rote.

"So you have come back at last, Herbert Harmer, to the house you have disgraced, to the home you have forfeited. We expected you; what would you have?"

"Nothing," Mr. Harmer answered. "I want nothing; I am come only to attend the funeral of my dead brothers."

"And would you, Herbert Harmer – apostate to the faith of your ancestors – would you dare to follow those who died faithful to their God? They cast you off in their life, and their dead bodies would bleed if you approached them."

"Cecilia," Mr. Harmer said, much shocked, "to what end these useless recriminations? I have trodden my path; those who are gone have followed theirs. We shall each answer before our Maker. Why should we make earthly quarrels about heavenly matters? Rather let us be friends, let us forget the long unfortunate past, let us be as brother and sisters to each other, and let me try to fill to you the place of those who are gone."

For the space of a minute there was no answer, and then the elder sister again spoke, but in a changed tone, and a voice in which some natural feeling struggled.

"It cannot be, Herbert. We have chosen, as you say, opposite paths, and we must keep them to the end. I do not – we do not – wish to think unkindly of you; we will try and forget what cause we

have for doing so. Even you must feel sorrow to know that the old walls which have held the Harmers so long, will, at our death, hold them no longer. For I tell you, brother, that it will be so. He who has gone has left us a life interest in part of the property, as trustees only for the good cause, and at our death it all goes to support the glory and power of the true Church. I tell you this that you may cherish no false hopes of what is not to be."

"I did not, sister. Knowing the Harmers as I know them, I was sure that neither I nor mine would ever dwell here. Still, I owe it to myself and my son to be present when that will is read. It is better to know for certain that the matter is final and irrevocable."

"The will will be opened and read after the funeral, which will take place at half-past eleven to-morrow. You are perfectly welcome to be present: indeed, it is better so."

"I have my legal adviser with me; I should wish him to accompany me."

"Certainly; he will see that everything has been done in perfectly legal form. Is there anything else you would say?"

"Nothing," Mr. Harmer said; and preparing to take leave, he approached the door, near which they were standing. He stopped before them, and then, with a sudden impulse, held out a hand to each.

"Oh, sisters, why should this be? Why, after so many years, should we meet and part thus? Can we not be friends? Can we not yet love each other? Can we not be happy together, and worship God in our own ways?"

Touched by the voice and manner, and by the warm, loving tone – such as for years had not fallen upon their ears – perhaps at that moment, for nearly the first time in their lives, they obtained a glimpse of what life might have been to them, but was not and now never could be; the floodgates of the hearts of those two cold, self-restrained women were all at once broken down, as never before they had been, and, with a passion of tears, they threw themselves simultaneously on their brother's neck.

It was not for long. Training and habit soon reasserted their power, and they stood before him again, calm, but still tearful and shaken.

"We have been wrong, brother; but no, not so. It has been good for us to have met you. I believe you to be a good man. I believe now that you are sincere, although grievously mistaken. If, as will probably be the case, after to-morrow we should not see you again – for our present intention is at once to retire from the world – we shall always think of you with kindness, as of the only being in it in whom we have an interest; we shall remember you with prayers to God, that you may yet see your errors and be saved; and now, good-bye."

"I shall see you to-morrow?" Mr. Harmer asked.

"Yes, after the funeral." And they were gone.

Mr. Harmer again took his place in the carriage, and returned sad and thoughtful to Canterbury.

At a quarter after eleven the next day, Mr. Harmer and his solicitor alighted from a carriage at the lodge gates, and, sending the vehicle back to the town, entered the grounds.

"I think you were wrong to come so early, Ransome. The service will last at least two hours. You had much better have taken my advice, and come on by yourself later."

"I shall do very well, Mr. Harmer. I can walk about the grounds. I see there are a good many people about, and I am sure to find some one to talk to till it is time for me to come in."

There were several other persons walking the same way as themselves towards the house; but they presently met a man coming in the opposite direction, – an old man, in a rough sailor's suit, with only one arm. When he came up to them he stopped, looked Mr. Harmer full in the face, and then took off his hat, saying, "God bless your honour! it's many a long year since I saw you. Do you not remember Robert Althorpe?"

"Bless me!" Mr. Harmer exclaimed, shaking the old sailor warmly by the hand. "I am indeed glad to see you, old friend. This, Mr. Ransome, is a very old friend of mine; I may say the first I ever had. So you are still here?"

"Aye, aye, your honour; but I live at Herne now. I came over here late last night, and heard you had been up at the house in the evening; so I thought you would be coming to the funeral this morning, and made bold to wait here in hopes of seeing you."

"You did quite right, and I am very glad that I met you. But there, the time is getting on, and I must not wait. Come down to the 'Fountain' this afternoon, and ask for me; we must have a long talk over old times, and I will see what can be done to make you comfortable for the future. This is a dreadful business," he added, as he turned to go up to the house.

"Aye, your honour, it is. God knows, I would have saved them if I could."

"You!" Mr. Harmer said, stopping suddenly. "What, were you with them? I remember now that the account said it was a one-armed sailor, but of course I never thought for a moment of its being you."

"Aye, your honour, it were me sure enough; but don't let me keep you now. I will tell you the whole yarn this afternoon."

Mr. Harmer walked away leaving the old sailor with the solicitor, who had, from the instant when the man said he had been present at the accident, regarded him with the most lively interest.

"So you were there, my man," he said. "Well, the day is very cold, I have some time to wait, and I daresay you have nothing particular to do, so walk down with me to the village; we shall be able, I have no doubt, to get a snug room with a good fire, and you shall tell me the whole story over a glass of grog."

When Mr. Harmer entered the house, he found the hall, and indeed the whole dwelling, thronged with the priests and assistants of the Romish Church, in the full robes of their office. All seemed engaged, and no one paid much attention to him. In a few minutes a procession was formed; in the rear of this he took his place, and it then moved with low chanting through the long passages of the house to the chapel which adjoined, and indeed formed part of it. Herbert Harmer followed mechanically, mechanically he took the place assigned to him there, and listened to the solemn service. As in a dream he saw the chapel hung with black, and the catafalque containing the coffins of his dead brothers, and the two black figures kneeling beside them; as if it were some strange thing in which he had no part or share. His thoughts went far back, through long years, to the time when he had last heard those solemn chants and smelt the faint odour of the incense, the tears welled up in his eyes, and his thoughts were still of the days of his childhood, when a stir around him roused him, and he saw that the service was over. In a few minutes the chapel was emptied, and all returned into the dwelling. Here a servant informed him that a gentleman was awaiting him in the library. Opening the door, he beckoned to Mr. Ransome to follow him, and together they went into the drawing-room. Here he found his sisters, and several of the higher clergy who had assisted at the ceremonial, assembled.

On his entrance his sisters rose to meet him, and greeted him with formal ceremony; but Mr. Harmer thought that, under their impassive exterior, he could perceive that they were much moved; and that, although thoroughly agreeing as they did in the propriety and justice of the deed, they were yet sorry at heart for the coming sentence which was to cut off their only surviving brother from all share in the old family property. Miss Harmer then shortly introduced her brother to those present, who received him courteously, being far too well bred men of the world to betray the least exultation over a conquered enemy who could no longer be dangerous, and towards whom, therefore, a generous magnanimity might be safely displayed.

A few general remarks suitable to the occasion were exchanged, and then at a sign from Miss Harmer, all took seats round the room, and a quiet business-looking man, evidently a solicitor, approached the table with a legal document in his hand. It was the will of the late Edward Harmer, which he opened and proceeded to read. Divested of all legal technicalities, the contents were briefly as follows: —

After leaving his sisters a life interest in a considerable sum, he bequeathed the whole remainder to his brother Robert. In the event, however, of Robert not surviving him, he ordered that the estate should be sold, and that the proceeds, together with all other property whatsoever of which he should be possessed – and the amount was large, as the Harmers had not for years lived up to their income – should be paid into the hands of two well-known dignitaries of the Roman Catholic Church, to be expended by them in accordance with an enclosed document.

When the lawyer had finished, he folded up the will, and, addressing Mr. Harman, said, —

"Have you any question you would like to ask? If so I shall be happy to answer you. This will was drawn up by me some years since at the request of the testator, who was in good health, mentally and bodily. I was myself one of the witnesses of his signature; the other witness can be produced."

"I have no question to ask," Mr. Harmer said, gravely; "the contents of the will are precisely such as I had anticipated they would be."

There was a pause, and the lawyer remarked, —

"In that case I do not know that there is anything further to be said at present."

Mr. Harmer turned towards his sister with the intention of saying farewell, when he was surprised by Mr. Ransome stepping forward and saying —

"I have a remark or two to make on behalf of Mr. Harmer in reference to the document which has just been read."

There was a little movement of surprise, Mr. Harmer being more astonished than any one present, and all listened with anxiety for what was to follow.

"I admit on behalf of Mr. Harmer that the document which has just been read is the last testament of the late Mr. Edward Harmer; of that no question can I suppose arise. By the terms of that will he bequeathes the whole of his property to his brother Robert, subject to the payment of the legacies to the Misses Harmer. In the event of Robert not surviving him, he makes other dispositions of his property. These it is not necessary to enter into, as that contingency has not arisen. For, gentlemen, I am in a position to prove to you that Mr. Robert Harmer did survive his brother; he, therefore, under the will, came into possession of the property, and as Mr. Robert Harmer has unfortunately died intestate, at least so I presume, Mr. Herbert Harmer, as heir-at-law, of course inherits the estate."

As Mr. Ransome spoke he moved to the door, opened it and called to some one who was waiting in the hall, and Robert Althorpe entered with his hat in his hand. No one moved, no one spoke, a stupor of blank dismay had fallen upon all present. Their faces, which when the will was read, were bright with irrepressible exultation, now expressed the deepest consternation. They could hardly believe that the prize which they had made so sure of was about to be snatched from their grasp.

"This," Mr. Ransome said, "is Robert Althorpe, the sailor who had charge of the little yacht belonging to the late Mr. Harmer, and who was the sole survivor of those who embarked in her. Miss Harmer knows that this is correct. Be so good, my man, will you, as to tell these ladies and gentlemen what you told me relative to the death of the Mr. Harmers."

"Well ladies, and your honours," the sailor said, "when I felt the boat go over I stuck to her, and never left go. I soon got my head above water, and clambered on to her bottom. I had hardly got my breath, before I saw a head come out of the water close by me. I held on to the keel with my hook, leaned over, and caught him by the hair, and helped him on to the boat beside me. That was Mr. Robert Harmer. I looked round again, and thought I saw an arm come up for a moment, but that was all I saw of any of them, and I don't think one of them ever came up after she upset. Mr. Robert Harmer was very weak, but he clung with me for nigh ten minutes, sometimes washed nearly off, and getting weaker and weaker every minute, and I saw he could not last long. We did not speak, the waves and the wind were too high, and we were half the time under water; but I could see the poor gentleman was praying very hard. At last a big wave came over all, and nearly carried me off, and

I had a hard fight to get back again. When I had time to look round, Mr. Robert Harmer was gone, and that was the last I ever saw of him. Which I am ready to take my davy."

When the sailor had done there was another long silence, and then Mr. Ransome said, —

"This, gentlemen, is perfectly conclusive proof that Mr. Robert Harmer survived his brother, and would be held so in any court of law. It is, I have no question, a surprise to you, as it is to my client, Mr. Harmer; indeed, it is only within the last hour that I have been put in possession of the fact; I am sure, therefore, that Mr. Harmer will not wish to force upon you any sudden decision; but I would submit to you that no question can arise either in the point of law or fact. I would suggest to him that he should retire for an hour and then return for your answer. In the meantime, merely as a matter of form, I have placed a person in the hall to keep possession of the place in the name of Mr. Herbert Harmer, as heir-at-law to his brother the late Mr. Robert Harmer. The sailor will remain here, and you can interrogate him further on the subject."

So saying, and bowing to those present, who had not yet recovered sufficiently from their dismay to utter a word, he took the almost stupefied Mr. Harmer by the arm and left the room.

After they had gone there was a long and animated debate; but the conclusion at which they most reluctantly arrived, under the advice of the lawyer who had drawn up the will, was, that there was at present nothing to do, but to leave Mr. Herbert Harmer in possession, and then, if upon deliberation and further advice it should be thought right to bring the case to trial, to do so. And so they all went away, and Mr. Harmer took possession of the home of his father; but not immediately, for his sisters asked him to leave them a week to make their arrangements. He begged them to stay there as long as they wished, and indeed pressed them to make it their home. This, however, they refused to do. By the will of their brother they were amply provided for, and they intended to travel, and perhaps finally to enter a religious house on the Continent.

So in a week the old house was empty, and Herbert Harmer entered it as undisputed master.

CHAPTER IV

THE LAST OF THE HARMERS

And so in spite of all human precautions and care, the property of the old Roman Catholic family was not disposed of for the benefit and glory of Mother Church; but passed into the hands of the Protestant and apostate younger brother, under whose ownership and care it changed not a little.

Not externally; there no great alteration was possible, unless the whole place had been pulled down and rebuilt, but the thick trees which had crowded it in, and made it dark and gloomy, were thinned out, so that the air and light could come in upon it; bright flower-beds took the place of the masses of shrubbery on the lawn in front, and as far as could be done, the whole place was cleared and brightened. Inside, much greater changes were made – there, indeed, the old house was completely remodelled, new paper, new paint, new furniture and fittings of every description. Modern windows were put in where practicable, that is, wherever they could be inserted without violent incongruity with the style of architecture; part of the house indeed – that part containing the principal apartments – was entirely modernized, party walls were pulled away, small rooms thrown into large ones, the ceilings and roofs raised, bow windows thrown out, and a bright, cheerful air given to it.

In the chapel adjoining the house great alterations were made. Coloured glass windows took the place of the plain ones formerly there; these had been inserted after a visit of inspection paid by a party of Puritan cavalry, who, not having succeeded in finding the man of Belial of whom they were in search, consoled themselves under their disappointment by the holy amusement of smashing the beautiful stained-glass windows, and destroying the decoration and carvings of the little chapel. The seats were now removed, and the shrines, hangings, pictures, and other emblems of the Romish Church were taken down. The grand stone altar was retained, and a large cross in black marble was placed over it, taking the place of the wooden crucifix which had so long hung there. At the foot of the steps leading up to the altar, and where they had so often knelt in prayer, a beautiful monument of white marble was erected to the dead brothers, on which the sun threw strange, solemn lights as it streamed in through the coloured windows.

All these changes and alterations were carried on under the personal care and inspection of Mr. Harmer, who, with his son, came down at once to Canterbury, taking up their residence for the first two months at the "Fountain," but spending most of their time over at the "Place." And although when masons and decorators once take possession of a house they generally contrive to make their stay nearly interminable, yet, money, energy, and personal supervision will occasionally work wonders, and in this case, in three months after taking possession – that is, by the end of June – Mr. Harmer had the satisfaction of seeing the work completed, and the little army of men engaged upon it fairly out of the house.

As soon as they had gone into residence, the neighbouring gentry called almost in a body. To them it possessed the charm of a new discovery; they knew the place existed, but all they had seen of it was the lodge gate, and the twisted chimneys of the house as they rose among the trees which shut it in from the view; that was all. They hardly knew what it was like, even from tradition; neither their fathers or grandfathers had ever called there; not that the religion of its owner had constituted any serious objection to their so doing, but the Harmers led too secluded and recluse a life to care about knowing any one. With only a very few among the county families of their own creed had they any visiting acquaintance whatever, and this was confined to an exchange of formal calls, or of stately dinners once or so in the course of a year. Their only intimate acquaintances were chosen among foreigners, ecclesiastics or others, generally Italian, whom they had known during their long absences on the Continent; of these there had been usually one or two staying in the house when the family were at home; beyond this they had no friends. But now all this was to change, and the

carriages of the neighbouring gentry dashed in quick succession up the drive where once the green moss had grown undisturbed, and gay talk and merry laughter were heard where formerly silence had reigned almost unbroken.

The visits afforded great satisfaction to those who paid them. The father and son were both much liked, and pronounced great acquisitions to the county society.

These visits were shortly returned, and invitations to dinner speedily followed. But not to dinner-parties alone was the festivity confined; picnics were got up, balls given, and it was unanimously agreed for once to overlook the fact that there was no lady head to Harmer Place, but that mothers and daughters should accept Mr. Harmer's lavish hospitality regardless of that fact. Indeed, the Harmer's accession to the property gave rise to a series of feasting and festivity such as had not been known in that part of the county for years previously.

Into all this Mr. Harmer entered with a fresh pleasure, and a frank joyous spirit which charmed and attracted all. With the ladies he was an especial favourite; to them his manners and address were so singularly different to those of the men with whom they were accustomed to associate, that they could not fail to be greatly impressed by it. Herbert Harmer had seen little or nothing of women, for – with the exception only of his wife, who had always been a great invalid, and whom he had nursed for years with almost devotional care and kindness – he had been thrown in contact with very few English women, and he regarded the whole sex with an almost chivalrous devotion and respect which in a man of his age was very strange and touching. Although a very well-read man – for in his distant home he had kept himself well supplied with the current English literature, and with scientific works of every description – he knew very little of real life. Of commanding intellect, had he been placed in different circumstances where his mind could have had fair scope for its exercise, Herbert Harmer would have made a conspicuous figure for himself; as it was, although all found in him a charming companion and a sympathizer in their various tastes, few would have suspected how great were the stores of knowledge which the simple-hearted childlike man had stored up in all those years of solitary reading.

It was this general sympathy for the tastes of others, together with the reverence for the sex, which led him to treat the young girl of seventeen with a deference not inferior to that which he would have exhibited for her white-haired grandmother, which made him so universally liked by women; and had Herbert Harmer, although a man of forty-seven, and looking older than he was, wished to marry again, he might have nearly taken his choice among the fair young Kentish maidens who surrounded him.

Women, especially young women, appreciate a character such as this far better than men can do. Their purity of heart recognizes instinctively its goodness and childlike wisdom; and very many would own to themselves that, without entertaining any passionate love for him, they could yet entrust their happiness to such a one with a confidence far more serene and implicit than that which they would experience in the case of a younger man.

Perhaps a thought as to the possibility of Mr. Harmer marrying again may have entered into the calculations of some of the matrons with grown-up families, and who would not have unwillingly have seen one of their daughters holding sway as mistress at Harmer Place. But if so, it was not for long; for Mr. Harmer, upon one occasion – when the possibility of such an event as a new mistress for his house being forthcoming when the alterations were completed, was laughingly suggested – resented the idea in quite a serious manner. From this it was quite evident that the future mistress of Harmer Place, whomsoever she might be, would enter it as the wife of Gerald rather than of Herbert Harmer.

Gerald was by no means so great a favourite as his father; nor, although he earnestly desired to be popular, could he altogether succeed in his object. He could not overcome the listless manner which his long residence in India had rendered part of his nature; he could not acquire an interest in all the chit-chat and gossip of country society, or manifest more than a most languid interest in the agricultural conversations and disquisitions which formed the large staple of the country gentleman's

talk. Of the price of corn he knew nothing. Malt and hops were mysteries, into which, beyond drinking the resulting compound, he had no desire to penetrate. And yet he was a sensible, good-hearted young fellow enough. His misfortune was that he had not strength of mind to adapt himself to the life and people he was thrown among.

Mr. Harmer was extremely anxious that his son should marry early and well; not well in a worldly point of view, but to some true woman, to whom he could look up, and who would in time correct the faults of his character. Those faults his father saw and understood; and he feared much that his weak and facile disposition would render him liable to fall into serious errors and faults, and would be not unlikely to lead him to be entrapped into some hasty marriage, the evil consequences of which might be incalculable to him. Mr. Harmer therefore watched with anxiety to see to which, among the various young girls of the neighbourhood, Gerald was most attracted, and at first he gave his father some little trouble. New to female society, it possessed an infinite charm to him; but he seemed to admire too generally to devote himself to any one in particular, and although he at once commenced a series of active flirtations, he appeared quite unable to single out any one for especial preference. *Les absents ont toujours tort*

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