

Mitford Bertram

Dorrien of Cranston



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Mitford Bertram Dorrien of Cranston

Chapter One. Concerning Certain Dorriens

General Dorrien sits at the breakfast table in the cheerful dining-room at Cranston Hall, with a frown upon his face and an open letter in his hand.

He is a handsome man, with severe, regular features; a man of whom his dependents would certainly stand in awe, and his family would fear more than love. There is sternness in the glance of his keen eyes, in the cut of the closely-trimmed grey moustache and whisker, and in every movement of the erect military figure. A man of iron will, not to be turned aside from his own hard and fast rule of right and wrong by any consideration – what chance had the foibles and follies of youth with one of this mould? And there he sits, motionless, gazing upon the open letter, the frown deepening upon his brow.

The letter bears an American postmark and is from his eldest son, whom he has not seen for eight years. It is business-like in the terse brevity of its wording, for it merely, and as a matter of duty, announces the writer's intended return to England, tidings one would think that should gladden a father's heart.

But in this case not so. Roland Dorrien and his father had parted in bitter anger. Faults on both sides, of course. The former wild, reckless and imprudent, as youth too strictly and needlessly restrained is almost sure to prove; the latter merciless and unbending. Resentful feelings and hot, hasty temper, met by additional severity and cold scorn – thus they had parted, and save two or three curt communications on money matters had held no intercourse since. And the son, sharing largely in the paternal force of will, has made no attempt at apology or conciliation during his exile; and now he is coming home.

So the General's reflections are not of a comforting nature. He has not softened during these years. Never was he known to give way; all must yield to him. The exile has not done this; therefore Time, rather than heal the paternal anger, has only consolidated it.

Roland is not his first-born. There was another, a fine cavalry soldier, who had already begun to distinguish himself in his father's profession, and him the General had loved as the apple of his eye. But one day news of a terrible Alpine fatality arrived at Cranston Hall. An Englishman and his two guides – both incompetent – had been lost on the Lauteraar glacier. They were seen by another party not very far behind them on that dangerous pass suddenly to disappear – and upon these arriving at the spot, a fresh rift in the brink of a black, bottomless crevasse showed that the edge had given way beneath the doomed trio who had approached it regardless of proper precaution. There yawned the horrible fissure, its glassy blue sides falling perpendicular into unknown depths, and revealing the barest possible traces of the catastrophe to the horror-stricken witnesses. The Englishman who had thus found a nameless grave in the most stupendous of Nature's vaults was Vernon Dorrien, the General's eldest son, and the light of the old soldier's life seemed thenceforth to be buried there also.

Roland was now the heir and would reign in his dead brother's place. Not of legal right though, for the entail ended with the present Squire, who had it in his power to will Cranston as he chose. But the General had his own stern ideas of right. The Dorriens had always held Cranston from father to son, or, failing male issue, from brother to brother, and in spite of his aversion to his eldest surviving son the latter would succeed him in the ancestral domain. Right and justice would not allow Roland

to be disinherited, but that he should fill his dead brother's place was very unpalatable to General Dorrien.

And now he sits with the letter in his hand gazing meditatively out upon the sunlit lawn and the noble elms in the park, and on the wooded hollows beneath the brown heather-clad uplands; and his soul is filled with bitterness as he thinks of the man who was to have owned all this fair domain now lying cold and stiff in his vast and icy tomb. The cawing of rooks floats in through the half-open window, and the flower-beds are stirred by a cool, soft breath from yon patch of amethyst sea just glimpsed through a dip in the downs away there to the right.

The window shuts with an angry slam, the result of the sudden opening of a door. He looks up quickly as a lady enters – an elderly lady with a strong-minded face. She must have been very handsome in her youth – she is handsome yet, though her dark hair is only just beginning to turn grey, and her large eyes are clear and lustrous still; but the firm moulding of mouth and chin seems to show that her will is nearly, if not quite, as determined as that of her husband. She takes her place opposite to him at the table.

“I have a letter here” – he begins – “from Roland.”

“Yes? And what does he say?” Her tone betrays scant interest in the subject, and she busies herself with the urn.

“Very little that he ought to say – very little indeed. Why, madam, you have taught your children the Fifth Commandment to small purpose.” And he hands her the letter with a bitter smile.

She takes it frowning, but without a word, for she has long learnt the futility of trying to stem his taunts or his anger. Her domineering spirit would long since have reduced most men to submission, but in her husband she had found her master; and thus for many a year a cold-hearted peace has reigned between them, but their characters are too much alike ever to harmonise, and they know it.

“He does not say he is coming home,” she remarks, handing back the letter – “only to England.”

“And he does not express a shadow of regret for his shameful behaviour before he went away, or for his treatment of me. And yet he talks about ‘his duty to inform me of his return.’ His duty!” repeats the General with bitter sarcasm.

“You know I told you, at the time, you were too hard on him. Things might have been worse.”

“Too hard on him! Might have been worse! Eleanor, are you mad? A son of mine to be threatened with a common breach of promise action by common low people. I don't see what could be worse.”

“Well, it was only a threat. The boy was imprudent, of course; but then, he was very young.”

“But old in vice, no doubt. But it was not so much the disgraceful affair itself that I felt, as that a son of mine should be mixed up with low, vulgar people.”

“They were not so very low. The father was a professional man – a surgeon in good practice, and – ”

“And would assess his daughter's affections at 4,000 pounds, and would exhibit the young *lady* in open court as a butt for the ribald wit of a filthy mob, and for the questioning and brow-beating and broad jeers of a set of profligate barristers. Really, Eleanor, I am at a loss to see how lowness and vulgarity could descend much further.”

To this conclusive retort she makes no reply. Then tentatively —

“But don't you think, Reginald, that he ought to come here now? He ought to be known in the county, if – if – ”

“If he is one day to take his place here – is not that what you wanted to say? Well, whether he does so or not depends upon himself. I may bequeath Cranston as I choose. Most men would cast off a son for a tenth of the undutiful conduct Roland has shown towards me; but I waive that. I only desire to be just. Roland will take his place here just as if he were the inheritor at law. But if ever he disgraces himself again, not one shilling will he get from me, and Cranston will go to his brother. So you had better find an early opportunity of warning him.”

It is lamentable to have to record the fact, but her husband's resentment against his son was not so displeasing to Mrs Dorrien as her conscience told her should have been the case. For even as all his affection is buried in the grave of his first-born, so does she dote upon her youngest. For the exiled Roland she has little love. He is too strong of will for her; and no more than over his father has she ever been able to exercise over him that power she delights in. But to see her idolised Hubert installed at Cranston as its heir – even though in his brother's place – is a tempting picture to the eyes of this woman, whose one weakness is love of her idol. To do her justice, conscience prevails, and she is about to urge even more in defence of the absent one, when a step is heard on the stairs, and the General exclaims:

"Hush. No more now. I hear Nellie coming down. Oblige me by not mentioning this" – tapping the letter – "to her, or to anyone, at present."

"Good-morning, papa," cries a fresh, cheerful voice, and the old man's face softens perceptibly beneath his daughter's kiss. She is a tall, largely-made girl, but not in the least gawky or ungraceful; and although her features are too irregular for conventional beauty, yet a profusion of soft brown hair, blue eyes and the warm flush tingeing a clear skin, together with a bright, taking expression when she smiles, combine to render Nellie Dorrien a pretty girl – some think, a very pretty girl.

"You're late, child," says the General, not unkindly. "Better sit down and get your breakfast. I must go and attend to my correspondence" – and gathering up his letters he goes out.

"I do think, Nellie," began her mother, as soon as they were left alone, "I do think you might take the trouble to be down a little sooner. Your papa is so vexed when everybody is late, and now you are both late, and he'll be doubly so."

"But he was not a bit cross, mamma, at least not with me."

"Not with you! No, perhaps not. But Hubert isn't down yet, and it'll all fall upon him. However, as you are safe, it doesn't matter about poor Hubert," added Mrs Dorrien acidly.

"Really, mamma, I don't think it's quite fair to saddle me with Hubert's derelictions. Surely he is old enough to take care of himself," gently objected the girl.

"Of course. Selfishness is the order of the day in this house, I ought to have remembered that."

Nellie gave a little shrug of her shoulders, but made no reply. She was far from being a selfish girl, but she could not see why everything and everybody should be made to give way to Hubert and his convenience, as it had to do wherever her mother's authority or influence reached. For Mrs Dorrien chose to fancy her youngest son an invalid, on the strength of which that interesting youth at the age of twenty-two would have taken first prize at an unlicked cub show – supposing such an institution to exist. Nellie herself knew this reputed debility to be sheer fudge – which knowledge she unconsciously shared with certain convivial and raffish spirits who were wont to meet more nights a week than was good for them at the "Cock and Bull and Twisted Cable" in Wandsborough, and these latter could have accounted for the poor boy's chronic seediness more to his mother's enlightenment than satisfaction.

"Hallo, mother. Morning, Nell!" cried the object under discussion, entering the breakfast-room and sliding languidly into his place. A sallow, loosely-built, light-haired youth, somewhat deficient in chin, and with an irritating drawl.

"At last, Hubert dear. I began to think you must have had a bad night, and was getting anxious!" said his mother fondly. "How are you this morning, my boy? You don't look at all well."

She was right – in one sense. He had had a bad night, the above-mentioned sporting hostelry containing proportionately less whisky and soda, not to mention other varieties of tippable more or less deleterious. The General's hair would have stood straight on end had he known when and how his youngest-born had arrived home.

"Oh, I'm all right, mother," growled that guileless youth, "except that I've got a deuce of a head on. But I say, what was the veteran looking so mortally black about just now? I met him on the stairs, or rather I saw him – he didn't see me, thank Heaven – and he was scowling like an assassin. He had

a lot of letters in his fist. By the way” – breaking off with a start of alarm – “no one has been dunning him about – about me, don’t you know. Eh?”

“No, no dear,” quickly answered his mother. “It was not about you. Your father is put out over his correspondence, but it is not about you. That I may say.”

“That’s lucky,” said Hubert, greatly relieved. “I didn’t know who might have been at him. But, mother, what was it about?” he persisted, his curiosity awakened in proportion as his fears were lulled.

“Nothing that you need mind,” returned Mrs Dorrien, rising and taking refuge from further questioning in flight.

“Nellie,” began the young man, as soon as his mother had left the room, “I wish you knew the Rectory people.”

“So do I. I just met the girls once at the Nevilles’ garden party, and rather liked them. But mamma would sooner cut off her head than have anything to say to them. But why do you wish it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. The eldest isn’t up to much – too cold and stuck up. As for the young one – Sophie – she’s a detestable brat. Tries to snub a fellow, don’t you know. Thinks herself no end clever. But the middle one – Olive – fact is, she’s a monstrously pretty girl.”

“Ahem! And when did you make that discovery?”

“Why I saw her at the station the other day – and rather took stock of her; and I tell you, a fellow might make something of her.”

“Or the other way about – she might make something of a fellow,” returned his sister, with a slight curl of the lip.

“Go it!” exploded the other wrathfully. “Of course it’s very funny and all that. I see what you mean, and the joke’s a poor one. I thought you might be of some use to a fellow; but if you want to play the fool instead, why there’s an end of it.”

“My dear boy, I can’t help you in the very least. You know mamma hates the sight of them, and as for papa he declares that if he had his will he would try poor Dr Ingelow by drumhead court martial and have him shot. It’s hard lines that we are to be at daggers drawn with people whom everybody says are awfully nice, just because their opinions are not ours, I must say.”

“Well, I rather agree with the veteran. All that papistical stuff is awful bosh, and a parson who goes in for it is no better than a wolf in sheep’s clothing – as old mother Frewen always says. But all the same that’s no reason why we shouldn’t know the girls.”

“Why didn’t you make acquaintance with the brother at Oxford?” asked Nellie.

“Oh, I don’t know. Didn’t think it worth while then. These freshmen are generally a bore.”

“Freshmen! Why this is his fourth term.”

“Is it? I didn’t know. Hallo – I say – there’s the veteran calling you, outside. Better look sharp, the old man’s face is getting apoplectic,” he added teasingly, discerning that the French window was jammed and wouldn’t open, and that the frown was deepening on their father’s face where he stood at the other side of the gravel walk.

General Dorrien had been comfortably off before he succeeded his elder brother, with whom he had been on bad terms, and whose death, some five years previous to the opening of this narrative, took place on the high seas during the voyage home from South America – a voyage undertaken by medical advice. The General accepted his new position and its responsibilities perfectly naturally and easily, and at once set to work vigorously and with military precision to rectify the numerous derelictions which had prevailed and thriven under the sway of his easy-going predecessor. It stood to reason that many suffered by the change. Consequently the new Squire was not beloved. But if unpopular with his dependents, by his equals he was received with open arms. He had been a brilliant soldier in his time, and had served with distinction in more than one of our wars in the East; the county therefore felt proud of his fame, being, in fact, not wholly free from some idea of having itself contributed thereto. Then the late Squire had been a bachelor, but here was a family who would keep up Cranston as it should be kept up. There ought to be a law against old bachelors occupying such a

place as Cranston, said the county, in its joy at seeing a family once more in possession at the Hall, and a family comprising two eligible sons – one of them a right royal “catch” – and a daughter who would certainly not be dowerless. So although on further acquaintance the General was feared rather than liked, yet the county was very well satisfied. But its feminine side longed for the return of the eldest son to his ancestral home, with a solicitude that should have been insidiously flattering to the unconscious wanderer had he been aware of its existence.

Chapter Two.

Concerning a Man and a Dog

Before a house in Cambridge Terrace a hansom draws up with that series of jerks peculiar to its kind, and discharges its freight – a man, a dog and a portmanteau, and while the first is making enquiries as to the occupant being within, the second is scampering up and down the footway as hard as he can pelt, for he has been pent up on shipboard and in trains for many a weary day, and now such an opportunity of stretching his legs is in no wise to be neglected.

“Not in?” the traveller is saying in reply to the servant who opens the door. “But he isn’t out of town?”

“Oh no, sir. Mr Venn’s generally home before this. He may be in any minute now.”

“All right. I’ll wait for him. Here, cabman, lay hold of the other end,” and between them they deposit the portmanteau, a battered and weatherworn campaigner, safe inside the hall door, and cabby, having received more than double his fare, retires well satisfied and mumbling gleefully, “Military gent ’ome from Hingia. Two bob and a ’arf crown from Euston. Yee-epp?”

“Just my luck,” muses the traveller with vexation in his face, as he gazes round upon his friend’s sitting-room, a typical bachelor den in all its pipe-and-book-and-stick-bestrewn untidiness. “Just my luck to come back to this cursed town to find the only man I know and could reckon on not at home – possibly out for the evening, and not a soul to speak to in the meanwhile.”

Here a scuffle and a vigorous whine outside the front door cuts short his ruminations. Quickly he opens it.

“Roy, you rascal, come in, sir. Humbugging after cats as usual?” This address, though irate in wording, is affectionate in tone, as the beautiful animal bounds past the instant the door is open, and draws up in the absent Venn’s room, wagging his bushy tail and looking perfectly satisfied with himself. His glossy red-brown coat breaks off at the neck in a white curling ruff which continues down his broad chest, whose normal snowiness is now grimy with railway travel. The soft brown eyes, set in dark circles, and the smooth velvety ears, betray his collie origin, ennobled and broadened as this is by the sturdier proportions engrafted upon it by the admixture of a larger and sterner race – peradventure of the real Newfoundland or Saint Bernard blood. After a few preliminary sniffs round the room the animal settles himself cosily on the rug, his soft, upturned eyes fixed affectionately upon his master. So much for the dog, and what of the man?

A tall and well-proportioned frame, which shows to advantage in its travel-worn suit of light tweed. A finely shaped head, carried high and erect and covered with dark clustering hair. A well-cut profile and regular features in which is an expression of quick readiness, render the face a striking and remarkable one, tanned as it is too by exposure to sun and weather. The eyes are very uncommon, and not at all in keeping with the dark complexion, being in fact violet blue; and there is that in their expression which, together with certain lines on the forehead, would to a physiognomist betray a stormy and unsettled spirit.

There is impatience in the gesture as he stands stroking his drooping moustache while gazing out into the rapidly darkening street. Suddenly Roy, raising his head, emits a threatening growl as a latch-key is turned in the front door. Then in a couple of strides a broad-shouldered, cheery looking fellow bursts into the room —

“Hallo!” is the startled greeting of the new-comer, pulling up short and wondering who the deuce was the intruder whose dog lay growling at him in right threatening fashion from his own hearth.

“All right, Venn. He won’t eat you,” is the stranger’s reply. “But don’t you know me?”

“Hanged if I do! No – yes – I do though. Why, Roland Dorrien, where on earth have you dropped from now?”

“‘The clouds’ you were going to say. No. The Rockies – game thing. Plenty of cloud, literal and metaphorical, besets the way of those whose lives are cast yonder.”

“By Jingo!” cried the other, passing his hand over his fair, closely cropped beard. “Why didn’t you say you were coming back? And did you get this splendid chap out West?”

For Roy, having sniffed the new-comer and pronounced him satisfactory, was now looking up gravely into that worthy’s face and wagging his brush as if desirous of an introduction.

“Yes. Traded him from an Indian who was battering him up a good bit with a rail because he didn’t take kindly to dragging a sledge. And ever since he has stuck to me very much closer than a brother. But then, you see he’s only a dog, not a human, which explains it.”

“Well, you’d better shake down here,” said Venn. “That is, if Mrs Symes has a room. I’ll ring and ask.”

Mrs Symes had a room, and the traveller shook down accordingly.

“I suppose you’ve been having a rare good time of it out West,” began Venn as later in the evening they sat over their cigars. “Shooting grizzlies and Indians, and chevying buffaloes, while a poor stockbroking devil like myself has been tied by the leg to this well-worn spot. Why it doesn’t seem eight years since I saw you off that jolly fine morning in search of fortune. And you’re twice the man you were then. No wonder I didn’t know you at first.”

“It is eight years though, rather over than under. As for having a good time of it, ‘Least said, etc.’ That is until the good old Squire’s bequest took effect, and then things weren’t so bad, because, you see, I could do what I liked, and I did. I forgot – you haven’t heard – how should you have?” seeing the other look slightly mystified. “Well then, the old Squire – my father’s brother, you know – and I used to be very thick, which was good and sufficient reason for my not being allowed to go near him. He died five years ago, as you may or may not know, and I own to feeling a trifle sold at being as I thought cut off with a shilling. Well, a year back, I heard that the good old chap had left me all his personal property to the figure of seven or eight hundred a year. His will stipulated that I was to be kept in the dark about it until my thirtieth birthday – a proviso for which I suppose I ought to feel devoutly grateful, for I was a consummate young ass in those days I’m afraid. Cranston, of course, was entailed, so he could do nothing with that. But he did the best he could for me.”

“Lucky dog,” said Venn. “And now you’ll get Cranston into the bargain.”

“Oh, hold hard, there. My chances of that are about equal to yours. Cranston *was* entailed – now it isn’t; my affectionate parent was the last man of that ilk. He can will it as he likes now or make a fresh entail, and I’m afraid that won’t be in my direction.”

“But you and he are surely not at cuts after all these years,” said Venn. “He’ll be glad enough to see you again now.”

“He isn’t that sort. He’s never got over that idiotic affair, or pretends he hasn’t. You know what I mean” – as Venn again looked inquiringly. “You don’t? Well, I don’t see why I shouldn’t tell you. There was a girl I used to be very thick with when I was up here before – didn’t mean anything by it of course. I was a thoughtless young fool, you know, and all that sort of thing. She was pretty and taking, and I used to see a good deal of her and take her about a good bit. Not to put too fine a point upon it, we carried on considerably. I always was inclined to be an ass in that line.”

“Quite so, old chap,” laughed Venn, as the other paused in his narrative and stared dreamily in front of him. “So you were – and so you will be again. Drive on.”

“Well things went smoothly enough for a while, and at last it struck me I was going a little too far, and so I began to haul off – found an excuse for leaving Town and so on. The admission sounds hang-dog I grant, but then, only remember my means and prospects – the first *nil*– ditto the second. To cut the matter short, one day – I was at home at the time – the General sent for me to his sanctum. Without a word he handed me a letter to read. It was from a lawyer, acting for the girl’s father, and threatening to sue me for 4,000 pounds damages for breach of promise. They thought I wasn’t worth anything – then at any rate – and so they’d try it on with my father. By the Lord, Venn old man, I

spent a lively half-hour. How he did let drive. I had disgraced him – disgraced the family – disgraced everybody – wasn't fit to look a dog in the face or to be in the same backyard with a self-respecting cat, and so on. Well now, if he had behaved with ordinary judgment, I was quite ready to admit having made an ass of myself – an infernal ass if he liked – for I was disgusted at the preposterous threat and the extortionateness of the demand. It seemed to ruffle my callow sensibilities, don't you see. But when he simply volleyed abuse at me and wouldn't listen to a word I had to say, by Jove! my back got up too and there was a most awful row. He would disown me on the spot – cut me off with a shilling – unless I left England and stayed out of it till he gave me permission to return. I might go where I liked, but I must clear out of the country. Well, I elected to go out West – and went. You know the rest.”

“Then that's how it was you went out there?” said Venn. “I always suspected there had been something under it deeper than you let out. And has he said you might return?”

“Not he. I didn't ask him. I can do as I like now, and as he'll cut me off anyhow, it doesn't much matter.”

“When do you go down to Cranston?”

“Don't think I shall go at all. None of us hit it off somehow, and more than ever am I better out of it. I think, though, I'll run down to Wandsborough and have a look round —*incog*, don't you know.”

“Wandsborough, did you say?” exclaimed Venn, astonished.

“Yes. It's the town adjacent to my hypothetical heritage. Know the place?”

“N-no. I never was there myself, but the rector there is an old friend of mine. Ingelow his name is; I'll give you an introduction to him.”

“Thanks, awfully. But – er – the fact is, I don't get on well with parsons, and – ”

“Oh, you will with this one. He's an out and out good sort. And Dorrien, you dog, he has some daughters. They were jolly little romps when I knew them years ago, and promised to grow up very pretty.”

“Did they? That alters the case. It'll be slow at Wandsborough. On second thoughts, Venn, I'll take your introduction, and will duly report if the promise has been kept. But see here. I'm going to prospect around for a week or two in that section, and I don't want my people to know I'm there, so I've thought of a wrong name. Put the introduction in the name of 'Rowlands' instead of Dorrien. That's the one I'm going to take.”

Venn replied that he was hanged if he would. But, ultimately, he did.

Chapter Three.

“At First Sight!”

The Church of Saint Peter and the Holy Cross at Wandsborough is full from end to end for the great service of the forenoon. It is Whitsun Day and the High Celebration is about to commence.

A noble building is this old parish church, with its splendid chancel and columned aisles and long spacious nave. Windows, rich in stained glass, throw a network of colour upon the subdued and chastened light within, and a great number of saints and martyrs, in glowing pane and canopied niche, would seem to afford representation of the whole court, and company of Heaven, whichever way the eye may turn; and here and there, glimpsed through a foreground of graceful arches, the red gleam of a lamp suspended in some side chapel imparts an idea of mystery and awe to the half-darkened recess where it burns.

To-day, the chancel is magnificently decorated. The high altar, ornamented with a profusion of choice flowers and ablaze with many lights, stands out a prominent and striking object, and visible to nearly everybody in the building. Large banners, wrought in exquisite needlework, setting forth the image of saint, or mystery, or some historical event in the annals of Christianity, are ranged around the walls. A perfume of incense is in the air, and, as the great bell ceases tolling, a low sweet melody, gurgling forth from yon illuminated organ pipes, seems specially designed to attune the minds of the awaiting multitude to the solemnity which is about to begin.

The seat nearest the light gilded railing which divides the choir from the nave is occupied by three graceful and tastefully attired girls. Two of them are apparently in devout frame of mind enough, but the third suffers her gaze to wander in a way which, all things considered, is not as it should be. Not to put too fine a point upon it, she is evidently given to looking about her. But the sternest of ecclesiastical martinets would find it difficult to be hard on the owner of that face. It is a face to be seen and remembered. A perfect oval, its warm paleness is lit up by the loveliest of hazel eyes, long-lashed, expressive, lustrous. Delicate features, and the faintest suspicion of a smile ever lurking about the corners of the sweetest little mouth in the world, complete the picture – a picture of dark piquante beauty which is more than winning. So think, for the hundredth time, more than one in its owner's immediate vicinity. So thinks for the first time one in particular, who, from the moment he entered, has done little else but furtively watch that faultless profile, as well as he is able and under difficulties, for he is nearly in line with the same. Who can she be? he is wondering. Is it the Rectory pew, and can it be that the owner of that rare face is one of the rector's daughters? It may as well be stated that the stranger's surmise is correct.

And now the congregation rises in a body as a long double file of surpliced choristers emerges from a side chapel. Then follow the three officiating clergy in their rich red vestments, attended by acolytes and taper-bearers in scarlet and lawn; and advancing to the steps of the high altar, all kneel. The great organ thunders forth like the surging of many waters, as the first verse of *Veni Creator* is solemnly chanted. Then, rising, choristers and priests advance in procession down the chancel. A thurifer goes first, flinging his censer high in the air, and the lights, borne one on each side of the great silver crucifix, gleam redly through a misty cloud. Bright banners move aloft at intervals above the shining pageant, which is closed by the richly vested celebrant and his attendants. Quickly the crowded congregation takes up the grand old plainsong hymn, joining in heartily as the stately procession wends its way slowly down the nave – a glow of light and colour – and, making a complete circuit of the spacious building, re-enters the chancel. The choristers file into their stalls; the celebrant and his assistants ascend to the altar and incense it in every part, as amid a great volume of choral harmony the service begins.

He to whom we have made brief reference watches the ceremonial with some interest. That he is a stranger is evident, and this, coupled with his striking appearance, is, we grieve to say, a fact which occupies the attention of many a fair devotee there present far more than it should, remembering the time and place. That it engrosses a sufficient share of that of the young lady in the front seat we grieve still more to be obliged to chronicle, remembering that she is an occupant of the Rectory pew. But the stranger does not reciprocate the general attention of which he is the object, for he has an eye for but one face amid that assembly of faces. Stay, though; another there attracts his interest to a tolerably vivid degree, and it is that of no less a personage than the celebrating priest himself; a strikingly handsome man of lofty stature, and whose forking grey beard descends, like that of Aaron, even to the skirts of his embroidered clothing – or nearly so. And in the countenance of this imposing ecclesiastic he detects a strong family likeness to the lovely brunette who first attracted his eye.

The service, magnificent in its artistic adjuncts, and impressive in its well-ordered ceremonial, proceeds. The stately altar, aglow with lights and gorgeous draperies; the solemn chant of the celebrant and jubilant response from choir and organ; the ever-changing postures and picturesque groupings; clouds of incense and the silvery ringing of bells at the culmination of the solemnity – all go to make up an imposing whole. But it is over at last. Choristers, acolytes and priests retire amid a stirring voluntary from the great organ, and the sunlight, intercepted and subdued by lancets of stained glass, falls in a hundred changing gleams upon the now empty chancel.

The occupants of the Rectory pew linger in their seats, and while the other two are busy gathering up their books and sunshades preparatory to a move, the girl whom we have noticed, turning half round, scans the departing congregation. As she does so she meets the stranger's glance and there is a meaning in it which renders her slightly confused – perhaps a little angry.

"Now, Olive dear, we'd better go," whispers a remonstrant voice. With a start and a half blush the girl recollects herself, and the three haste to follow in the wake of the now thinning crowd, which is streaming out through the west door.

"Ah-h! what a relief to be outside again!" exclaimed she who had been addressed as "Olive," as the three girls wended their way beneath the tall feathery elms which shaded the churchyard walk. "I declare I thought it was never going to end."

"Hush, dear I don't talk like that," answered the eldest of the three, with a slightly scared look around. "If anyone were to hear you, what would be said?"

"That a man's foes are they of his own household," came the reply with a merry, ringing laugh. "That if our dad must give us such a long and elaborate function on so heavenly a morning as this, he might at least let us off a twenty minutes sermon."

Even more startled looked the remonstrant, as at the moment some acquaintances passed within earshot. What if they should have heard?

"It's no use shaking your solemn old head at me, Margaret," went on the first speaker. "I meant what I said, and I don't care who knows it. Now we shan't have time for a walk."

Margaret Ingelow made no reply. She was a fair, good-looking girl of twenty-five, with a thoughtful, refined face. Her bright young sister's levity often jarred upon her uncomfortably when exercised upon sacred or ecclesiastical subjects, for which she herself entertained the profoundest reverence. Left motherless at an early age, upon her had devolved the care of the younger children, and this, combined with her position as head of the household, had endowed the rector's eldest daughter with a gravity of thought and manner beyond her years.

"Olive, look! Who is that, I wonder!" exclaimed Sophie, aged seventeen.

"That" was a masculine figure a little in front on the opposite side of the street, for they had left the churchyard now. Olive, following her sister's glance, recognised the stranger who had attracted her notice in church.

"Perhaps someone down here for the Whitsun holidays," struck in Margaret's quiet voice. But for some occult reason the remark was received by Olive with a little frown.

"In other words, something between a cheap trippist and a bank clerk," she said. "No – not exactly."

"Keep your temper, Olive dear," laughed Sophie maliciously. "We didn't know the subject was a tender one or we'd have –"

"Why, what a pace you girls walk at!" cried a cheery voice behind them. "I thought I should have to return home in my own sweet society."

"Oh, father, there you are at last," cried Margaret, stopping as the rector joined them. "We quite thought it would be of no use waiting."

"That tiresome Mr Barnes always keeps you prosing in the vestry for half an hour," struck in Sophie. "What an old bore he is! I can't see the use of churchwardens at all."

"Our friends at the Radical club do, dear," rejoined her father with a twinkle in his eyes. "How on earth would they emphasise their arguments without a goodly number of 'churchwardens' to smash?"

"Now, father, you know I don't mean that kind of churchwarden, so don't try and be sarcastic," cried Sophie. And the rector burst into a hearty laugh.

It is a pleasant sight that quartette wending homewards along the sunny street already given over to the stillness of a provincial town at the Sunday dinner hour. The girls in their light, tasteful summer dresses looking as fresh and cool as roses on which the dew yet lingers, grouped around the tall upright form of their father, who, with one hand thrust in easy attitude through the sash of his long flowing cassock, walked among them looking supremely happy and contented, now and again bestowing a nod and a pleasant smile in response to the greeting of some passer-by.

"Father," said Olive, thrusting her hand through the rector's arm and nestling up to his side with the most bewitchingly affectionate gesture. "Do you know you're a dear, sweet old dad, and I'm very proud of you?"

"And wherefore this sudden honour, darling?" enquired he, gazing down into her upturned face with a fond smile. He was afraid to own to himself how he loved this beautiful, wayward second daughter, who tyrannised over him in all things domestic, to an incredible extent. For the fact must be recorded that this one was the spoilt child of the house.

"You sang the service beautifully to-day – and it was worth something to hear you," she replied. "And yet you want to make us believe you are losing your voice – like Mr Medlicott, who can't even monotone on G without getting flat."

"My dear little critic, perhaps it is that Medlicott has more to worry him than I. Though to be sure he is spared such a dreadful little plague as this," rejoined the rector with his sunny laugh, pressing the arm, passed through his, to his side.

"Oh, indeed! Well then, for that let me tell you you gave us too long a sermon," she retorted.

"Did I? It was only eighteen minutes."

"Far too long. Look now. We are done out of our walk all through that. And just look what a heavenly day it is."

"Poor little things!"

Margaret, turning her head, encountered her father's ruefully comic, mock-penitent glance, and was hardly reassured. She regarded his sacred office as so great – so tremendous – a thing, that to hear him taken to task by this giddy child in his discharge of it always grated upon her. And all accustomed to this kind of talk as she was, yet she felt uncomfortable under it. For she was pre-eminently one of those who took life seriously. But the rector and his favourite daughter thoroughly understood each other.

"Goodness!" cried Sophie, as a neat brougham drawn by a pair of fine greys swept past them. "Why if that isn't the Dorriens' carriage."

"Surely *they* weren't in church!" said Margaret wonderingly.

“Hardly, I think,” said the rector, with a lurking smile and a flash of quiet merriment in his dark eyes. “Poor Mrs Dorrien looks upon the parish church as a very well of iniquity – and myself, the Pope, and a certain personage who shall be nameless, as an excellently matched trio.”

“Old pig!” muttered Olive to herself.

“Why then, it must have been Hubert Dorrien after all,” said Sophie. “I thought it was, but he was too far back to be sure. Every time I looked round I caught that detestable eyeglass glaring at me.”

“‘Every time’ – ahem! And pray how many times was that?” said her father, drily.

“Oh, there now, I’ve done it,” cried Sophie with a laugh and a blush. “But it was only once or twice as the procession was coming round, and that was all behind us, so we couldn’t see anything of it unless we did look back. Will that satisfy you, dad, dear?”

“Well explained!” said the rector with a hearty laugh. “We must let her down easily on a great occasion, mustn’t we, Margaret?”

“But all the same that Hubert Dorrien angers me – he looks so conceited and supercilious always,” went on Sophie. “He’s a horrid boy?”

“‘Boy!’ Why hear her! Why he’s five years older than you, Sophie,” laughed her father.

“Well then he doesn’t look it,” retorted she. “And he’s always tied to his mother’s apron-string.”

“I wonder what Roland, the eldest one, is like,” said Margaret; “the one in America. I wonder he doesn’t come home.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t get on well at home,” suggested Olive. “But I wish he would come. He’s sure to be nice, if only as a change from his utterly horrid family. And nice people – or at any rate nice men – are conspicuous here by their absence.”

The rector frowned ever so slightly – for his favourite daughter added to her other peccadilloes a decided penchant for flirtation. But like a wise man he said nothing, and by this time they had reached the gates of their pretty and cheerful-looking home.

Chapter Four.

The Rector of Wandsborough

The Rev. William Ingelow, Doctor of Divinity of the University of Oxford, had, at the time our story opens, held the living of Wandsborough about fifteen years.

On the face of the foregoing chapter, it is needless to explain that Dr Ingelow was a very “advanced” Anglican indeed. He was even too advanced for the bulk of his clerical brethren of his own way of thinking, who were wont to shake their heads while declaring confidentially among themselves that “Ingelow went too far,” and was likely to do more harm than good to “the Cause” by going to such “extremes” and so forth. He was a regular Romaniser, they declared. Instead of trying to re-Catholicise the Church on good old Anglican lines, he boldly adopted Roman ceremonial in every particular. And his teaching – that, too, was far too outspoken. Invocation, auricular confession, and the like, he taught too openly. English people were not quite prepared to swallow pills of this nature without such a coating of silver leaf as would completely and effectually disguise the salutary medicine within. Ingelow was an admirable parish priest in every way – but – a Romaniser. Thus his clerical brethren.

But the rector only laughed good-naturedly to himself. He candidly admitted the terrible impeachment – even owning that his sympathies, liturgical and disciplinary, were entirely with the enactments which proceeded from the City on the Seven Hills. Liturgical matters in the Church of England had been handed down to them in a state of hotch-potch, and the “restoration on good old Anglican lines” theory of his Ritualist brethren meant every man doing what was right in his own eyes. There must be some rule in these matters, argued the rector. The “Roman Use” was the rule of Western Christendom. Moreover it was teachable, fairly simple, dignified and impressive, he declared. Therefore he carried it out in its entirety in his fine parish church and was in every way satisfied with the result. His colleagues would fain have followed his example, but lacked the courage of their convictions – Anglican clergymen not uncommonly do. So they continued to shake their heads and declare oracularly that “Ingelow went too far.”

Wandsborough Church was old, but in extremely good preservation; a few timely restorations carried out under the *aegis* of its present incumbent had consolidated this, and at the time of our story it was one of the finest parish churches in the land. The beautiful spire boasted a full peal of bells, whose cheery carillon could be heard for miles around, and every few hours would ring forth a sacred tune which, floating melodiously out over the pleasant downs, might on a still night even reach vessels passing far out at sea. The interior of the building was metamorphosed in a trice beneath the new rector’s reforming hand. An imposing altar raised on many steps, and decked with tall candles and shining crucifix and rich draperies, took the place of the old trestle-board table with its worn-out baize cloth. The old-fashioned “three-decker” gave way to a fine piece of sculpture and marble, and the bi-weekly humdrum parson-and-clerk duet found itself disestablished to make way for a daily chanted office rendered by rows of surpliced and carefully trained choristers in the carved chancel stalls. The chief service on Sundays and festivals was literally High Mass, being a judicious compound of the Book of Common Prayer and translations from the Missal; and on any day and every day the ringing of handbells and the gleam of lights at the side altars in the early morning told that the rector and his assistants were diligent in the execution of their daily offices. Lamps burned before shrine and saint; the pictured “Stations of the Cross” decked the walls, and altogether it was perhaps little to be wondered at that the Doctor’s clerical brethren looked askew, and asserted that “Ingelow went too far.”

Now all this was not carried without considerable opposition. There was a hubbub, of course. The parish raved about “the restoration of Popery.” The rector smiled and alluded suavely to “a

reversion to first principles.” The parish protested – fumed – threatened. A section of it growled, and stayed away; a larger section growled, but continued to attend. The bulk of it, however, ceased to growl, for it discovered that there was, on the whole, nothing so very terrible about all this; then it entered heartily, and with not a little enthusiasm, into the new order of things.

Apart from any intrinsic merit underlying the new system there were many causes at work, all gravitating towards its general acceptance. The rector was wealthy, and did a great deal for the town. He was very popular and very persuasive, and it would be a mere question of time to carry the greater portion of his flock with him. He was a resolute man – not obstinate, simply determined – and where principle was involved he was adamant. Other considerations carried him through. Apart from his reputation for learning – though this involved a wide and general knowledge rather than erudition in any particular branch – he was a man of considerable means, and was open-handed to a fault. The other was his enormous personal popularity, for he was the most kind-hearted and genial of men. He had the same sunny smile, the same cheerful greeting, for those whom he knew to be in opposition to him – for those who went to chapel, and for those who went nowhere. So he was on all sides voted a “good fellow,” “the right sort,” “a charming man,” or “a perfect gentleman,” according to the station in life or the sex of his admirers.

A cheerful disposition, like a Grecian nose, is a natural gift, and not cultivable at will – all solemn old cant to the contrary notwithstanding. Given the constitution of an elephant, the physique of a gladiator, the absence of positive knowledge as to the location of a liver; added to absolute freedom from all possibility of pecuniary care, and a thoroughly congenial profession, and it is manifest that if a man is not cheerfully disposed, he deserves to be hung without delay. But where the rector of Wandsborough differed from other lucky ones blessed with these advantages, was that he was perfectly sympathetic towards those who enjoyed them not, and therein lay the merit of his own cheerfulness. He thoroughly understood human nature. In his younger days he had been a great traveller, having devoted several years to nothing but seeing the world, and deferring to take holy orders until considerably later than most men who enter the clerical state. And the knowledge thus gained of men and manners in varying climes had stood him in good stead, and not least in acting as a counterpoise to a narrow and professional tendency, almost inseparable from “the cloth” in a greater or less degree. And this he himself was the first to own. At the time our story opens, he had turned his sixtieth year; but, on the principle of a man being no older than he feels, Dr Ingelow was wont to consider himself still in the prime of life.

His family relations were of the happiest kind. His children adored him – the three girls whose acquaintance we have just made, and his only son Eustace, a fine young fellow of twenty, now in his third term at Oxford. Left a widower at the birth of his youngest girl, Dr Ingelow had come to Wandsborough two years later, and sought solace in his bereavement in thus throwing himself into an entirely new field of labour. What was wanting in a mother’s care for the younger children was as nearly as possible supplied by Margaret, the eldest, who was so helpful, so thoughtful beyond her years, that it had never even entered her father’s head to import any such lame makeshift as an aunt or a governess into the family circle. Rumour whispered that more than one of the fair – whether maid or widow – in Wandsborough and its neighbourhood would gladly have consoled the rector for his earlier loss, but, if so, much disappointment was unwittingly scattered by him among the gentle aspirants; or if any such stray whisper reached his ears he would laugh good-naturedly to himself over the absurdity of the idea; for, as things stood, there were few happier homes than Wandsborough Rectory.

Chapter Five.

The Wag of a Dog's Tail

Wandsborough at the period of our story was what might be called an out-of-the-way place. The nearest railway station was fully three miles off, and even that only found itself on a branch line. It would be difficult to account for the existence of the little old town, but that at one time it rejoiced in manufactures of its own, and did a steady trade. Then the tide turned. Foreign products ruled the market, to the exclusion of Wandsborough goods. Factories closed; the stir and bustle of labour became a thing of the past; and the place was given over to a sleepy and respectable quietude.

From the point of view of those who love the latter, Wandsborough was extremely lucky in its remoteness, being almost unknown to tourist and holiday maker. Lucky, too, in having so far escaped the speculator's eye; for though more than a mile from the sea, it was near enough, and possessed attractions enough, to warrant its transformation into that foretaste of eternal punishment, a British watering-place – nigger minstrels, shrimps, donkeys, barrel organs, yahoos, and all. Its country walks were of the loveliest, whether you climbed the heather- and gorse-clad uplands, and drinking in the salt breeze, turned to look back upon the little town, with its red roofs and tall spire, nestling in a green hollow, while on your other hand, far beneath, danced and sparkled the summer sea; or whether, turning your steps inland, you strolled through shady lanes where the ferns and wild geraniums grew amid fresh cool moss, and little brown wrens hopped warily from frond to frond beneath the shade of a miniature scaur. Or if seaward bent, what a wild, picturesque, ever varying coast was there for you to explore!

Down one of the ways leading thither comes Olive Ingelow. It is a warm morning, almost too warm to be comfortable anywhere out of the shade, although the distant steeple is only chiming a quarter to ten; but one side of the road is overshadowed by tall elms, and beneath these the girl gracefully walks. She makes a very lovely picture, the lithe figure in its cool morning dress moving with the elastic step and ease of youth. A large light straw hat shades the delicate oval face, and the glance of her dark eyes wanders joyously over sunlit meadows where lambs are frisking among the buttercups. She carries a two-handled canvas basket, containing drawing materials, though, should she weary of reproducing Nature, yet another solace does the canvas basket contain, for is not that the corner of a novel peeping out? She is going to have a whole long morning all to herself on the seashore.

Leaving the road, she steps over a stile and strikes into a field path. Hot though it is in the open, there is a certain delight in the glowing warmth upon her cheeks. She wanders from the path and her dainty boots are powdered with yellow particles from the buttercups which her feet displace. It is a heavenly morning, she thinks; one to make her feel lovingly disposed towards all the world – but – oh! and the girl catches her breath in a spasm of alarm, suddenly remembering that this field is wont to be the abode of a certain grisly terror to the unwary pedestrian, in the shape of a remarkably large and vicious bull. A quick furtive glance round reassures her. The field is empty. But all the same her heart beats pretty fast until she is safe over the next stile, and she is conscious of a lingering, if insane, apprehension that the enemy may peradventure arise out of the earth.

Then the last field is left behind, and a stony bit of barren ground grown with patches of gorse dips to a steep, narrow, staircase-like way, whose rocky walls rise abrupt on either side. Descending this, Olive finds herself on the beach.

She is in a small semi-circular cove shut in by perpendicular cliffs. At quite low tide it is possible to approach or leave it by a narrow strip of shingle at either end, at other times it is only to be gained by the way down which she has come. Settling herself comfortably at the foot of one of the great rocks which lie scattered capriciously about the beach, Olive pauses to rest and recover herself before beginning to draw. The sea is like glass, now and then the merest breath rippling over it in shades of

blue and silver and gold. Brown rocks, left bare by the receding tide, upheave their slippery backs, heavily festooned with seaweed, and the broad level sands lie wet and glistening in the sun. Now and then a large gull, stalking along the extreme edge of the uncovered shore, rises with a scream, and wings its way to the lofty recesses of the cliff. Yonder three or four sturdy bare-legged urchins are busily plying their shrimping nets, and gathering in much spoil from numerous clear pools gleaming amid the green brown rocks. And so still is the air that their voices and laughter are borne distinctly to Olive's ears, though mellowed by distance.

She begins to investigate the contents of her basket. Nothing is left behind? No – colour-box, block, palettes, brushes – all are there; not even the water-bottle forgotten. She will just throw off the upper end of the little bay, and bring in those two great turret-like rocks – whose bases are covered except at the very lowest of tides – and the rough, jagged headland, from which they seem to have broken loose and fled to take up a position of their own out in the midst of the sea. Comfortably ensconced in her snug position, for half an hour the girl is very busy. The outline of her sketch is drawn, and she is ruminating on the laws of perspective previous to the first wash of colour, when lo! another factor appears on the scene – another living thing within the silent and secluded cove. It is a dog.

Careering to and fro over the firm level sands, his snowy chest and ruff gleaming in the sun, and his silky brush streaming out like a flag, he keeps looking upward at the cliffs, uttering the while short joyous barks, as if to say to someone not yet in sight, "Aha – here I am – down first on this splendid beach. So come down after me as quickly as you can, for – it is fun?"

"Oh, what a love of a dog!" cries Olive, dropping her work to watch him. "Here – come here, you beauty – come and talk to me, and let's have a look at you!"

The beautiful creature stops suddenly in the midst of his gambols, startled at the sound of a human voice where he thought himself quite alone. Then, wagging his bushy tail, he trots up to where she is sitting.

"You love! You perfect picture!" cries the girl ecstatically, throwing her arms round his snowy ruff and gazing into his soft, laughing brown eyes. "Where do you come from, and who do you belong to?" She kisses him in the middle of the forehead, and lays her cheek against his velvety ear. The dog presses affectionately against her, trying to lick her face with his hot panting tongue.

A low, shrill whistle. The unappreciative animal tears himself from her and stands for a moment gazing inquiringly around. But as he rushes from her there is a metallic sound, and lo! the little tin vessel containing her painting water rolls off the rock, upset by a stroke of his bushy tail, and the contents are swallowed, in a trice, by the thirsty sand.

Olive gives a little cry of dismay as she sees her morning's work brought to a standstill. There is no fresh water anywhere about. She is gazing ruefully on the empty vessel, when a shadow falls between her and the sun. Looking up with a start, her glance meets that of another – not for the first time. Before her stands the stranger who gazed at her so attentively in the parish church on Sunday.

"I'm afraid my rascally dog has done serious damage. I don't know how to apologise sufficiently on his behalf. Pray forgive him – and me – if you can. Is that absolutely your last drop?"

"I'm afraid it is. In fact – it is," replies Olive, and her rueful smile changes to a brighter flash as she looks up at him. "But it was not altogether his fault – nor yours. I called him."

"Oh! He is such a clumsy fellow sometimes, and yet he ought to have learnt manners by now. Here – Roy! Come here, you villain, and see what you've done. Now – what have you to say for yourself, sir!"

The dog walks slowly up with a downcast air and a drooping tail, though the latter is softly agitating in deprecatory wags. He looks very penitent beneath his master's stern tones, but there is no trace of cowering.

"Please don't be angry with him," says Olive. "It really was all my fault for calling him. But, then, he is such a beauty."

“There, Roy. Do you hear that – you bad dog? Come here and apologise. It isn’t often you fall in with those who return good for evil. Here – give a paw – no, not that one – the other.”

Sitting down in front of Olive, the dog lifts his right paw and gravely places it in her little hand.

“Now the other!” cries his master – and he repeats the performance with the left, looking up into her face with such soft, pleading eyes.

“There,” says Roy’s master. “You don’t deserve to be treated so generously, you bad dog. And now” – turning to Olive – “will you let me try and remedy the mischief? There must be fresh water somewhere about the cliffs.”

“Oh, I couldn’t think of troubling you to that extent. Besides I am not bound to draw this morning. I have a book here, and would just as soon read instead.”

But this does not meet the stranger’s views at all. He intends to talk to this girl, now that a fortunate chance has put it in his power to do so. He can do so while she is drawing – hardly if she reads. So he answers, but without eagerness:

“It will be no trouble at all. And I think you ought to draw this morning, because it is just one of those days which are built for that purpose. You can read at home, but you can’t reproduce this perfect bit of coast anywhere but here. So I’ll start off upon my errand of reparation before you are angry with me for presuming to lecture you,” and picking up the little canister away he goes.

Olive laughs softly to herself as she looks after him. He is so cool and self-possessed, and then his voice, too, is a very pleasing one. Who can he be? She hopes he will return soon with or without the water, and not be in a very great hurry to continue his walk. Then she is the least bit in the world frightened. What would Margaret, for instance, say if she could see her sitting in this out-of-the-way corner of the seashore, talking to a man who is a perfect stranger? And how the tongues of Wandsborough would clack – a phase of exercise, by the way, to which those unruly members were by no means unaccustomed. Anyhow she can see at a glance that the man is thoroughbred. If he is making any stay in Wandsborough, as she is inclined to think is the case, she is sure to meet him sooner or later, so why not forestall the acquaintance? If he is not, why then in all probability she will never see him again, and in either case there is no harm done. She is thus musing, when the object of her reflections appears at her side, as suddenly as he did before.

“I have been successful,” he says, setting down the canister very carefully. “But I am afraid you were waxing impatient.”

“Not at all. I think you have been very quick, and I did hope you would be able to find me some water, for I feel in the humour for daubing just now.”

“Good. And now allow me to arrange the necessary articles,” and without waiting for an answer he opens her colour-box and sets her palettes and brushes in order.

“An artist,” thinks the girl. “Of course that’s what he is,” and on the strength of this inspiration she ploughs away nervously with her brush, though shyness as a rule is not one of those sins which can fairly be laid to Olive Ingelow’s charge.

“That won’t do,” presently remarks the stranger, who is leaning lazily against the rock watching her work. “Excuse me – but you must just round off this outline a little more – it is too hard and steely – so,” as acting obediently on his directions the drawing begins to assume life-like shape.

“I suppose you paint a great deal?” ventures Olive deferentially. Who knows what R.A. of renown may be criticising her crude attempts!

“No, I don’t.”

“But you used to,” she persists.

“Never wielded a brush in my life.”

“But you seem to know all about it. How in the world could you tell me to make those alterations if you can’t paint yourself?” she asks quickly, her incredulity giving way to a flash of not unnatural resentment.

“Pardon me. I didn’t say I couldn’t. What I said was that I never had.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No, because I could – if I tried.”

“How do you know you could?”

“Well, since you so mercilessly bring me to bay I am compelled to answer you with a woman’s reason. I know it – because I do.”

They both laugh heartily.

“And now tell me,” goes on the stranger. “What is the name of those two eccentric towers of rock you are drawing?”

“They are called The Skegs. There is a story attached to them, and a ghost.”

“Yes? What sort of a one?”

“Well, it’s rather an eerie affair altogether. Most family ghosts haunt the family seat. That of the Dorriens seems to prefer the open air. The story is a very old one. Two Dorriens fell madly in love with the same girl.”

“Not an uncommon circumstance. And did they fight – or play *écarté* for her?”

“Neither. One killed the other. It’s a long story, and I’m very bad at telling long stories. I always mix up the people and begin by telling the end first. But the end of this one is that The Skegs are haunted by the murderer’s ghost, and that it only appears before the death of a Dorrien. Then a black cloud settles down upon the highest of the two rocks, and those who see it can distinctly hear the wild baying of a dog. And it takes the shape of one.”

“A decidedly uncanny, though not original form, for there’s no part of the world without that very phase of apparition,” remarks the stranger, gazing thoughtfully at the two great rock towers. “Has anyone ever seen this spectre?”

“Yes. When Captain Dorrien was lost in the Alps three years ago, the fishing people in Minchkil Bay say it appeared. They believe in it implicitly. It was seen, too, at just about the time old Squire Dorrien, the General’s brother, died at sea.”

“And do you believe in it?”

“I don’t know. I suppose not. And yet if I were anywhere near the spot at night I’m sure I should be horribly afraid of seeing it. None of the fishermen like to go near The Skegs at night, but I suppose we ought to rise above such beliefs. Even my father won’t say he doesn’t believe in it, but he always rather evades the subject, so I don’t press it.”

“Quite right. And who are these Dorriens for whom the laws of Nature condescend to alter their course?”

“Ah! Now you’re laughing at my story. Never mind. They are the largest landowners hereabouts and their place is Cranston Hall. It lies in a line with that lofty headland – that’s Minchkil Beacon – three miles from Wandsborough.”

“What sort of people are they?”

The girl gives a little shrug of her shoulders and makes a distasteful *moue*. “Not nice. At least nobody likes them much. I don’t, though I don’t know them personally. It’s a case of instinctive dislike.”

“So you indulge in instinctive likes and dislikes,” says the stranger with a queer smile. “A very feminine trait.”

Then he relapses into silence. It is delightful to him to sit there in the golden summer morning, watching this beautiful girl with the oval face and expressive, ever-changing eyes. Roy, extended at full length on the shingle, is dreaming, his head resting on the skirt of Olive’s dress. Afar off the smoke of a distant steamer streaks the horizon, but for all else the blue sea is deserted. The shrimping boys have disappeared round the rocky promontory, and save for the girl, the man, and the dog, not a living thing moves within the cliff-girt bay. Inch by inch the sun creeps up to where they sit, which spot in a few moments will afford shade no longer.

Then, faintly distant, rings out the chime of a church clock.

“Three-quarters!” exclaims Olive listening. “I must go. It is a quarter to one – already.”

The last word slips out unconsciously. The morning has passed very quickly in the society of this man whom the merest chance has thrown in her way, and whom she may never see again; as to whose very identity she is in ignorance.

“Don’t go yet,” pleads the stranger. “I suppose the regulation 1:30 is the time you must be back by – and it won’t take three-quarters of an hour to walk to Wandsborough – if that’s your destination.”

“Yes, it is – ” She hesitates. He might as well tell her where he is staying.

“Well, have pity upon a homeless wanderer, and give him and this lovely spot another short fifteen minutes.”

Olive yields – but neither talk much. At length she packs up her drawing things and rises.

“Not ‘good-bye’ yet,” urges her companion. “Our ways lie together for a little distance. Allow me to escort you that far.”

Without waiting for a reply, he takes up her basket and they slowly ascend the cliff path. Roy, ever ready for a change, starts out of the land of dreams and trots briskly before them.

Olive is rather silent and inclined to give random answers to her companion’s occasional remarks. The fact is, she is a little bit frightened at her adventure, and her uneasiness increases the nearer they approach the town.

Just as they gain the road an equestrian trots by, a young man with a pale vapid countenance. He slackens his pace as he passes, and sticking up his eyeglass favours Olive with an admiring stare. Her escort’s hand instinctively clenches.

“Who is that – cub?”

“Yes, ‘cub,’ that’s just what he is,” answers the girl angrily. “It’s Hubert Dorrien.”

“Oh!”

Her companion keeps a strange silence for the rest of the way, and there is a slight frown upon his face.

“Here we are at Wandsborough,” he says at length, as they gain the outskirts of the town. “I ought to have relieved you of my company before, only there was no means of doing so, as our ways both lay along the same road. Now, good-bye. I shall remember this morning for a very long time. This is a small place, and we are sure to meet again. I shall look forward to the pleasure of improving our acquaintance.”

She flashes upon him a bright little smile, and trips away lightly down the empty street – thankful that it is empty. Then for the first time it occurs to her she has been talking to this stranger all the morning as freely and naturally as if she had known him all her life.

Chapter Six.

“Mr Rowlands.”

Roland Dorrien paced slowly up and down the little garden in front of his lodgings, smoking his after-breakfast cigar, and making up his mind to the discharge of an unpleasant duty.

He had been nearly a week at Wandsborough, and was surprised to find how quickly the days had slipped by. The country was new to him, the weather delightful, and he thoroughly enjoyed his long rambles, with the faithful Roy for his sole companion. Venn's letter of introduction had been duly handed in at the Rectory, but hitherto no notice had been taken of it, a circumstance which did not trouble him, for he was by no means tired of his own company.

The unpleasant duty to which he was making up his mind, was the betaking of himself to Cranston. It would be a constrained sort of a meeting, and therefore unpleasant. He had gathered enough during his stay in Wandsborough to show that his people had not changed for the better. Well, it had to be got through somehow; but he would not betake himself thither straight from here. He would run up to Town, and come down as if for the first time.

His cogitations were interrupted by the voice of his landlady announcing in a tone of flurried importance:

“Dr Ingelow, sir.”

“So sorry I was not able to look in upon you earlier, Mr Rowlands,” began the rector in his bright genial manner. “The fact is, I am short-handed just now, and busy times are the result. And this must be my excuse for calling at such an early hour.”

“Not at all – very good of you. Here, Roy – come away, sir – I am afraid that dog never will learn manners. Go and lie down, sir.” For Roy, without even a preliminary growl, had made friends at once with the rector. Indeed so demonstrative had been his friendliness that that excellent priest's cassock bore token of the same, in the acquisition of many white and brown hairs.

“Don't send him away – he's taken to me at once – fine fellow?” said the rector, patting him. “And pray don't throw away your cigar, as I see you were about to do. I like smoke – too well, my girls tell me. And how is Venn? Let me see, it must be many years since I saw him. What's he doing now?”

“Something in the City – stockbroking, I believe.”

“Is he! His people tried ever so hard to make a parson of him, but he didn't see it at all – nothing would induce him to become one – and he was right. Venn is the best of good fellows, but he'd never have done for a parson. His father sent him to me to try and get him hammered into Orders, and more than half quarrelled with me because I could take a horse to the water but couldn't make him drink – ha! ha!”

“H'm! Queer people, fathers,” said Roland with a laugh, in which his visitor joined right heartily.

“You think so, do you? Wait till you get to my age, and you'll be still more of that opinion. At least, if you're not it'll be for no want of telling.”

They chatted for a few minutes longer, and then the rector rose.

“I hope you'll come and dine with us some evening,” he said in his easy genial way. “There'll be only ourselves, and we shall be delighted to see you. Let me see – why not come to-night – that is, if you have nothing better to do?”

“Nothing will give me greater pleasure.”

“Very good. Then this evening at seven. Now I must say good-bye, for I have to rush about all the morning. So glad to make the acquaintance of a friend of Venn's.”

When the rector had gone, Roland was so preoccupied with recalling the strong family likeness existing between his companion on the beach and his departing visitor, that he quite overlooked the

fact that the latter had made no reference whatever to Cranston; rather a strange thing, under the circumstances.

“Well, sir, and our rector’s a nice pleasant gentleman, isn’t he?” remarked the landlady, while laying the cloth an hour later.

“He is indeed, Mrs Jenkins. Been here long?”

“Nigh upon sixteen years. Miss Margaret and Miss Olive were little then, and Miss Sophie were a baby. They do say as Dr Ingelow was dreadful cut up when he lost his poor lady.”

“Oh, he’s a widower then?”

“Yes, sir. His lady died shortly before he came here, I’ve heard tell. But law bless you, sir, Miss Margaret, she did for all the younger ones as though she was a grown-up young lady.”

“How many of them are there – daughters, I mean?”

“Three, sir. You must have seen them in church, in the front seat of all. Not on the side of the heagle – the other side.”

“Oh!”

“Yes, and they’re that good – although the two younger ones, leastways, are merry and fond of a bit of mischief. Why when Jenkins broke his leg” – and the good woman launched out into a dissertation after the manner of her kind, straying far away from the goodness of the parson’s daughters, which Jenkins’ broken leg was hauled in to illustrate – far away even from that fractured, but once more useful, member itself into a great cloud of reminiscence, wherein the speaker’s uncle’s deceased wife’s sister’s third cousin once removed and a certain tom-cat endowed with marvellous properties largely figured.

Her auditor gave a weary sigh. In the hope of finding out more about his new acquaintance, he had let the woman’s tongue run on, and found, like the ingenious Oriental who invented a steamboat, that having once set it going he was unable to stop it.

Roland ate his luncheon in a brown study. His landlady’s gossip had told him what he wanted to know. The girl by whose side he had sat and walked yesterday morning – the girl who had so strangely attracted him in the parish church, was the daughter of his late visitor – and to-night he was to dine at the Rectory. Things couldn’t have turned out better. Yet all this was in the highest degree absurd. What could it matter to him who she was – or indeed if he never saw her again! But that morning on the beach! Bosh! He had not fallen in love with her – not he. He knew better than that. Yet Roland Dorrien, gloomy of temperament and entertaining no spark of affection for any living soul, was obliged to admit to himself that he had thought and was still thinking a good deal about that oval-faced girl with the dark expressive eyes.

And here a new idea struck him. That assumed name had been all very well up to a certain point, but now that he had accepted the rector’s invitation it had an ugly look of entering a man’s family circle under false colours. He wished now he had never adopted it, but then his plan of staying in Wandsborough *incog*, would have fallen through, and that he did not wish at all. Well, he would let it alone for the present. Perhaps during the evening he would find an opportunity of explaining matters to his host: at any rate to-morrow he would run up to Town for a day or two, and return to Cranston in ordinary and conventional style. That would put matters right.

Chapter Seven.

“I Told You We Should Meet Again.”

When Roland Dorrien was marshalled into the Rectory drawing-room, he found himself, somewhat to his surprise, its sole occupant.

A glance around told him that it was a pleasant room to be in. The elegant furniture, the pictures on the walls, the innumerable knick-knacks bestowed about, were all in the most perfect taste. There was that about the room which made it unmistakably clear that its presiding goddesses were refined and well-bred women. It was a bright room withal, as well as a tasteful one. Wide French windows opened upon the garden, and a strong aroma of roses both from without and within hung heavily upon the air.

Suddenly Olive came in. With a start of astonishment she stopped short.

“You!” she exclaimed.

“My fortunate self,” he replied, advancing to meet her. “I told you we should be sure to meet again, but I little thought how soon.”

“To think of it being you,” she went on, her face beaming with merriment over the fun of the situation, which, the first surprise past, she began thoroughly to enjoy. “Margaret told us father had asked someone to dinner, and we thought it was some clerical friend of his.”

“I am afraid you must get over the situation, Miss Olive, and put up with only me.”

“In that case, seeing that you have the advantage of me, and that there’s no one here to introduce us *en règle*— you might – er – ”

Voices in the hall, and the shutting of doors proclaiming the arrival of somebody, interrupted her.

“Well, how are you again, Mr Rowlands?” cried the rector cheerily. “I’m disgracefully late. This is Mr Turner, one of my colleagues,” he went on, introducing a broad-shouldered young man, shaven of countenance, and in clerical attire, who had come in with him.

The conversation at table was brisk and lively, and what especially struck the guest was the spontaneity and utter absence of constraint with which the girls chatted away – now keeping up a running fire of chaff among themselves or with their father, now poking fun at this or that local character. Then they would parenthesise an explanation for his benefit, endeavouring to sweep him into the fun: and succeeding – as though he were no stranger at all. It was delightful, he decided; and then, oh, horror! – a thought struck him which spoiled all. What if they were to turn the fire of their wit on to his own family, to start poking fun at the members of the same, in total ignorance of his own identity? He must really throw off this infernal pseudonym at the very earliest opportunity.

“How do you like Wandsborough, Mr Rowlands?” asked Margaret Ingelow, when they were seated at table.

“Oh, it seems a nice little place. One can go about as one likes, independently of everybody.”

Sophie spluttered at this.

“Why it’s the most gossipy place on earth, Mr Rowlands,” she said.

“I suppose so. Most small places are. But the coast scenery is very fine.”

“Isn’t it? And the beach, too. Have you been to the beach yet?”

Fortunately Turner was not at that moment talking to Olive, or he would have met with random replies. She was thinking, “Oh, if Margaret should ever come to know of yesterday morning!”

Roland answered in the affirmative and then Turner struck in.

“By the bye, Mr Rowlands, that must have been you I saw down there yesterday. I was envying the owner of that splendid dog.”

Olive was on thorns. Her accomplice, however, was equal to the occasion. Noting her uneasiness, he took up the subject at once, and the narrative of his acquisition of the faithful Roy soon directed the conversation to the wilds of the Far West, where the rector himself had gone through some stirring experiences in his younger days. During the reminiscences involved, Roland caught a rapid grateful glance from the bright eyes of his *vis-à-vis*. Then he began to study Turner's face, whose owner was listening attentively to his host's anecdote, and came to the conclusion that he did not like it. Moreover he was not sure how much concealed intent lurked beneath Turner's innocent remark. Turner was bumptious – most curates were. No, he did not like Turner. Confound the fellow! what did he mean by looking at and talking to Olive in that familiar and appropriating way – as if she belonged to him, or soon would? But if she should, what the deuce was it to him – Roland Dorrien? Nothing – only these young parsons put on far too much side. Clearly Turner wanted taking down.

"I think you were in church on Sunday, were you not, Mr Rowlands?" said Margaret, dispelling his brown study.

"Er – Yes. Yes – I was. Very fine ceremony and music too. I never came across anything of the kind before."

The approval implied in this answer atoned for its absent-mindedness and brought a gratified smile to Margaret's face. The speaker had quite won her heart.

Then the conversation became general, and there was a vast deal of laughter and banter, and Roland found himself frequently appealed to, to act as umpire in some ridiculous point of debate, and in fact treated as an intimate friend rather than as a stranger who had not been two hours in their midst, and as he caught the bright, mischievous retort which Olive threw at him over her shoulder as the girls withdrew, he blessed the luck which had thrown him by the merest chance into such a delightful circle. Nor could he help contrasting the probable scene at Cranston at this moment, and a sort of mental shiver ran through him as he did so.

"Circulate the intoxicants, Turner – or, in plainer and more decorous English, pass the bottle," cried the rector, as the door closed on his daughters, leaving the men to themselves. "Fill up, Mr Rowlands. And now I want you to tell me about your travels. I was a good deal in the States as a young man. When I was out West, the Plains tribes were not exuberantly friendly. That was even before you were in long clothes, I fancy, ha! ha! but yet we had two or three grand buffalo hunts with them. There's a head upstairs in my boy's smoking den – where we'll go and have a cigar by and by – whose owner I turned over on one of those occasions. Splendid head, and well set up too."

Then these two – the old traveller and the younger one – plunged into a flood of reminiscence in all the delightful *abandon* of a common and welcome topic. At last the rector started to his feet.

"Hallo?" he cried. "This won't do. We mustn't sit too long, or we shall meet with a warm reception in the other room. As it is we shall, so let's face our troubles like men."

His prediction was verified.

"Father, what a long time you've been!" cried Sophie, as they entered the drawing-room.

"How men *can* sit and gossip!" struck in Olive. "Talk about us poor women! When a lot of men get together the sky may fall, but they won't move. What have you been talking about all this time?"

"Rattlesnakes, buffaloes, scalps – nothing worse," cried her father, throwing himself into an armchair. "Mr Rowlands and I have been counting up scalps, and we find he has lifted more hair than your venerable parent."

Roland, manoeuvring towards a vacant seat at Olive's side, was disgusted to find himself forestalled by Turner.

He felt more nettled than he cared to own to himself. The bumptiousness of these young parsons was overwhelming. So he took up the thread of their former conversation with his host and tried to pretend he rather preferred it to carrying out his original intention. Tried to, but it was of no use. Yet why should he care because another man sat talking about nothing in particular to a certain

person with whom he had intended discussing precisely the same interesting topic? Why, because, dear reader, he was an ass.

But his innings were to come. A message came for the rector, and its purport concerned Turner too. Roland, in obedience to a scarcely perceptible glance from Olive's dark eyes, at once took possession of the vacant seat.

"What have you done with that darling of a Roy?" she asked in a low tone.

"Left him at home. When I go in he'll nearly eat me. It's worth while leaving him anywhere, if only to see him go mad with delight when I come back. But then, you see, he's only a dog, and doesn't know any better."

"I'm afraid we must defer our cigar together, Mr Rowlands!" cried the rector, re-entering the room. "I've been called out to a sick bed, and hardly know when I shall get home. But don't hurry away. Turner, you're in no hurry, I know. Good-night. We must have another sporting conversation before long. I've enjoyed a chat over old times immensely."

Turner, however, did not remain long after his host's sudden departure, and Roland, deeming it right to follow his example, also withdrew. But he strolled down the dark street in a brown study, when suddenly there rushed at him in the darkness something which nearly upset him outright, and lo! Roy, who had broken bounds on hearing his master's step, now came springing upon and against him just in time to save that master from over-shooting his own door in a fit of absence, and wandering about half a mile too far. And then there was such a rushing and scampering, such barks of delight, such leaping and bounding, that it took Roy a full ten minutes of exertion to work off the gladness wherewith his affectionate heart was overburdened. But then, you see, he was only a dog and knew no better.

It was long, however, before Roy's master flung away his last cigar end, and looking out into the silent, starry night, wondered what the deuce he had been thinking about. Affected to wonder, too, how it was that his thoughts were still hard at work within the bright home circle he had just left.

Chapter Eight.

The Heiress of Ardleigh

"I sat, Nellie, the ancient couple are getting quite dissipated in their old age. What's at the bottom of it?" And Roland Dorrien, lounging at ease in the stern cushions of the boat, gazed through a great cloud of smoke at his sister's puzzled face, lazily awaiting her reply.

"I don't quite see," she began. "How do you mean, dear?"

"Why, your mother hoped I didn't particularly want to go anywhere this afternoon, because some people were coming. In fact, a regular garden fight. Croquet and scandal, and much chatter."

"Yes, there is. But as you say, they are getting quite lively. Why it's more than a year since we have had anything of the kind."

The two were seated in one of the most comfortable and roomy of the boats, on the ornamental water – whither they had betaken themselves, not to row about, but to get into a cool place and take it easy and chat to their hearts' content. The boat's nose was made fast to a stake driven into the bottom about fifteen yards from the shore and well within the shade of a great over-arching tree, whose boughs threw a network of sunlight here and there upon the brown surface. There was scarcely a breath of air, and at the other end of the lake the coots and moorhens disported themselves, uttering now and again their loud chirrupy cry, and little brown water rats glided from their holes beneath the slippery bank. Roy, whom his master had taken into the boat and treacherously flung overboard, was careering up and down the bank, looking like a great woolly bear, every hair in his body shaken out to its fullest length and standing on end – and barking his surprise and displeasure at his master's treachery and his own involuntary bath, but feeling worlds the better for the last, while a couple of swans floated in the centre of the pond, looking the picture of ruffled and sullen dignity over the irruption of these disturbing elements into their own especial domain.

"Well, it's rather a nuisance as far as I am concerned," he went on. "As it happens I wanted to go into Wandsborough this afternoon – and over and above that, I hate things of this kind."

"Roland dear, don't go into Wandsborough to-day. Papa will be mortally offended if you do. I happen to know that he got up this affair solely on your account; he thought it would be a good way of introducing you to all the people here. And there'll be several nice girls."

"H'm!"

"Let me see," she continued. "There are the Nevilles, who are coming to stay: the eldest girl is very pretty and the heiress of Ardleigh Court – make a note of that. And the Colonel is such a dear old man. Then there's Isabel Pagnell, she seems to take wonderfully with the men – and the Breretons and –"

"Bother the lot of them?" cried Roland, flinging the end of his cigar away in a sudden access of irritability. "Roy, don't make that confounded row, sir. Lie down. D'you hear? And now, Nellie, we shall have to quit this cool retreat, for there goes gong Number One. Yes, it's a nuisance; I particularly wanted to go over to Wandsborough to-day, but, hurrah for boredom instead!"

No more was said as they paddled back to the landing place and made their way along the shrubbery path. Did the girl in her heart of hearts suspect the reason of her brother's anxiety to ride over to the town? If so, like a wise counsellor she held her peace.

Roland had transferred himself to Cranston some three days after we saw him at the Rectory dinner-table – now more than a week ago, and even that brief period had been sufficient to convince him that in his former anticipations of the conditions of life there, he was not likely to be agreeably disappointed. The same constraint pervaded everything, the same latent antagonism seemed to underlie all intercourse, and in a hundred and one small ways, the more risky because so trivial, the general harmony seemed in a state of chronic peril.

One of his first acts had been to make a call at Wandsborough Rectory to explain the circumstances of the assumed name. At first his explanation had been somewhat stiffly received, but it was not in Dr Ingelow to keep up resentment; moreover, a happy remark to the effect that the *incognito* had been the means of beginning what the speaker hoped he might be allowed to call a valued friendship, which otherwise he might never have known, completed the turning of the scale, and he was absolved all round. Yet not quite all round, for Olive, remembering her free and easy utterances made on the beach that morning, found an early opportunity of taking him privately to task.

"I think you might have told *me* at the time," she had said, "instead of letting me run on with all sorts of local gossip as you did."

"Why? Oh, I see. But you didn't abuse us a bit more than we deserve. I asked you a question and you answered it. And, between ourselves, the answer didn't surprise me in the very least."

"That's all very well, but you ought to have stopped me."

"How hard-hearted you are, when all the others have forgiven me!"

"Have they? Oh, well, then, for the credit of the family I suppose I must exercise the same Christian virtue," had said Olive mischievously. "You may consider yourself forgiven by me too. There."

"One thing more," he had urged, "is wanted to make that forgiveness complete. You must continue to mete me out the same treatment as you did to the stranger, Rowlands; not categorise me as an obnoxious Dorrien."

"That will depend entirely upon your future behaviour," she had returned, with the same mischievous flash.

The lake was barely five minutes' walk from the house, and as the two – the three, rather, for Roy, all the fresher for his ducking, was trotting along at their side – turned the corner of the garden walk, they came face to face with their mother and two young ladies, who were speedily introduced as the Miss Nevilles.

"We've been in the coolest corner of the county all the morning – on the water," said Roland, catching his mother's displeased glance at his sister. "Nellie wanted to go indoors half an hour ago, but I positively refused to let her land."

"What a beautiful dog! Is it yours, Mr Dorrien?" said the eldest.

"Yes. Come here, Roy, and exhibit yourself." Roy obeyed, but manifested no great effusion in response to the young lady's somewhat timid caresses. His master decided that Clara Neville was at the moment thinking more of the fit of her gloves and the pose of her head, than of the dog or anything else. She was a tall, slight girl, faultlessly dressed, and in good style altogether; but in spite of the regular profile and wavy profusion of her golden hair, the face was not altogether a taking one – an unfriendly critic would have pronounced it a somewhat cold and ill-tempered one. But then she was the heiress of Ardleigh Court – whose place in the county ranked little below that of Cranston, and this would cover far graver shortcomings. Her sister, Maud, was a quiet, dark-haired little thing, with no pretensions to looks. Yet there were many who thought that a future lord might be found for Ardleigh Court much sooner were she the heiress.

Their father, a jolly, bluff veteran with an ever-ready laugh, was as complete a representative of one type of old soldier as his friend and erstwhile companion in arms, Reginald Dorrien, was of another. The Colonel was the kindest-hearted of men. Cheery, frank and full of life and humour, he was an immense favourite with the rising generation, and indeed with everybody. Everybody except his wife and eldest daughter, by whom – such is the irony of events – the old man's jovial and kind-hearted character went entirely unappreciated. They chose to consider it lamentably lacking in dignity.

"Dorrien," cried Colonel Neville to his host as they sat at luncheon, "is it true that your fellows have dropped down on that rascal Devine again?"

"Yes. Caught him in the act. Two hares, or three – I forget which. He was taking them out of the hangs when they dropped upon him."

“Ah! We must make it lively for him at the Sessions the day after to-morrow. The law ought to empower us to send a regular poacher to serve in the army. Why, when we were up country on active service some of our best men were ex-poachers. Why, Dorrien, you yourself remember poor Wilkins that time we – ”

But the jolly Colonel’s reminiscence was cut short by his eldest daughter, who appealed to him to settle a divergence of opinion between herself and Nellie. This was a regular tactic of Clara’s. Her father was never to be suffered to launch out in reminiscence. Old men, she declared, old soldiers especially, with a mania for reminiscence were always bores. So the exploit of “poor Wilkins, ex-poacher,” was destined to remain unnarrated.

Of all the more or less inane phases of entertainment devised by society with a view to doing its duty by its acquaintance, the garden party is not far from being the most tiresome. The Cranston one bore a striking family likeness to others of its kind.

Roland, who hated the whole thing, and wished all the people at the deuce, and through whose head was buzzing a confused string of names – belonging to people to whom he had been introduced – found himself, before he was aware of it, in a vacant seat next to Clara Neville, and almost felt grateful to her for being there. She would do to talk to, as well as anyone else, and he would be spared the trouble of opening up fresh ground. So an involuntary sigh of relief escaped him, which that young lady, for all her imperturbable calm, made a careful note of.

“Don’t you play croquet, Mr Dorrien?” she said.

“I don’t. Nothing on earth would induce me to embark in the very feeblest attempt at amusement ever devised by a stark idiot for the scourge of civilised man.”

She laughed. “Do you know, between ourselves, I quite share your opinion. The game is, as you say, terrible boredom. But you have been a great traveller, have you not?”

“No. Nothing out of the way. I’ve knocked about a good deal, but only where everyone else has.”

“Ah, you must have seen some strange things. And I think every man who can should travel. Not in the beaten tracks – on the Continent – but in far wild countries where he is entirely dependent on himself. It must open up the mind a great deal, and do a world of good.”

“Yes, it has a very salutary and hardening effect; there’s no doubt about that.”

“I suppose now you are home again, you will settle down for good,” she went on. “And this is really a very beautiful spot, is it not? But you travellers are never happy for long in one place?” she added, turning to him with a very engaging smile, the more valuable on account of its rarity.

“Likely enough it’ll be my bounden duty to become moss-grown now,” he answered with a laugh.

“No, don’t move, Roland,” said his father, as he rose to give up his seat. “I’m not going to sit down,” and there was a cordiality in his tone, as well as in the light touch of his hand upon his son’s shoulder, which caused that worthy to marvel greatly. But Roland was glad to be left in peace, so he sat chatting with Clara Neville, heedless of the notes of invitation thrown out to him from many pairs of bright eyes, till at last, feeling bored, he seized upon some pretext to slip away and have a stroll round the shrubbery with Roy.

But the first person he encountered on turning into it was Colonel Neville, who started guiltily, and then burst into a hearty laugh.

“Aha!” he cried, “another defaulter! Come along, my boy, and we’ll have our smoke together,” and he puffed away at his half-smoked cigar. “We must bind ourselves not to betray each other, unless we are caught red-handed, as I thought I was just now, by Jove!” And the jolly Colonel gave vent to another of his ringing laughs, to the jeopardy of bringing about the very discovery he wished to avoid.

“Don’t let’s go towards the lake,” laughed Roland. “People are sure to wander down in that direction. This’ll be our best way.”

“But bother it! you’ve no business to desert the ladies, sir,” cried the Colonel, as they turned into an unfrequented path. “It’s all very well for an old soldier like me, but you’ve your time to serve. They’ll be raising the hue and cry for you.”

“Let them. Fact is, Colonel, I’ve been so long outside the civilised world that I was dying for a smoke up yonder just now. So the fragrant weed beat lovely woman clean out of the field.”

The old man laughed again. He had taken a great liking to this, as he thought, unfairly treated son of his old friend.

“Look here, Roland, my boy,” he said, suddenly becoming grave. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you here, safe home again. You mustn’t mind my speaking plainly to you – for, although we’ve never met before, your father and I fought in the same lines and quarrelled like fury together, over and over again, before any of you were born or thought of – so I don’t mind what I say to you. Your father’s a queer fellow, but I think he’s fond of you in his own way underneath it all, so don’t run more counter to each other than you can help.”

There was such genuine warmth in the other’s address that Roland was touched. He was about to reply, when voices were heard approaching, and almost immediately a footman hove in sight.

“Colonel Neville’s horse is at the door, sir,” he said, and from the expression of his face no doubt he added to himself, “and a precious long time he’s been waiting.”

“Ha! I’m afraid they’ve been looking for me far and wide. You must come over and see us, Roland, as soon as you can. My wife was hoping to have been here to-day, but she didn’t feel up to the attempt. So mind you come, for we shall all be very glad to see you.”

They had reached the party by now, and many a glance of reawakened interest was levelled at the younger of the truants, but in the slight stir attendant on the Colonel’s departure he escaped unscolded.

“Well, Roland,” said his father, entering the smoking-room late that evening. “How did the affair go off to-day? Pretty well?”

“Oh, I think so. It struck me that all the world looked contented with itself. And it made its fair share of row, a sure sign that it wasn’t bored, anyhow. Do you mind my lighting up, sir?”

“No, no. Light away. Why yes, I think the people seemed to enjoy themselves. By the bye, you were talking a good deal to Clara Neville. What do you think of her?” And the General stood with his back against the mantelpiece as though about to wax quite chatty.

“She seems a sensible sort of girl, on the whole, and can talk rationally. But she always gives you the idea that she is thinking more of her dress than of what you are saying to her.”

“Perhaps there is a little of that in her manner, until you get accustomed to her, that is. But after all, it’s a very pardonable fault; more than made up for by the corresponding virtue of neatness,” replied this veteran martinet, who had been wont to visit with the severest penalties a single speck on shining boot or pipe-clayed belt when parading his men. “And she is as you say, a sensible girl – a very sensible girl – and she will have Ardleigh Court.”

“Indeed?” said Roland, in an uninterested tone. “Are there no sons, then?”

“No. Only those two girls. Clara will come in for Ardleigh, as to that there is no doubt whatever. It is one of the finest places in the county, and adjoins this. You can just see the village away on the right as you come here from Wandsborough. Ah, Hubert, and have you come to do the ‘chimney’ too?” as that hopeful burst unceremoniously into the room, pulling up short at the unwonted vision there of his father. “Well, I suppose you two fellows will be able to entertain each other, so I’ll say good-night.”

For a moment Hubert sat in silence. Then he opened the door and looked out, and returning to his seat gave vent to a low, prolonged whistle of astonishment.

“By Jove!” he exclaimed. “What the very deuce is in the wind now, that the gallant veteran should condescend to honour this classic den with his high and mighty presence?”

“Doesn’t he ever, then?”

“Never; never by any chance. And so confoundedly affable as he was, too. Well, it beats me.”

“Perhaps he’s going to turn over a new leaf and develop a vein of sociability hitherto undiscovered. It’s never too late to mend, you know,” said the other nonchalantly.

Chapter Nine.

“You Here!”

“Before Colonel Neville, Mr Pagnell and the Rev. John Croft, Stephen Devine, a notorious offender, charged with snaring two leverets in a field on the outskirts of Cranston Manor Farm” – began the reporter for the local news, scratching away vigorously with his spluttering quill.

The hall in which Petty Sessions were held at Wandsborough was not by its imposing dimensions calculated to impress anybody with the majesty of the law. It was small, low ceiled and badly lighted. Prisoner and witnesses, constables and magistrates’ clerk all seemed jumbled up together in the cramped space; while their worships themselves were only separated from the common herd by a long, narrow table. A most inconvenient room in fact, and times out of number had the Bench agitated for its enlargement, or better still, for the construction of another. All in vain. The justices had to go on sitting in the stuffy den, an infliction sufficient to bring them together in a state of ill-humour most unpropitious to the culprit. Even their genial and kind-hearted chairman, Colonel Neville, was wont to wax irritable under the circumstances – while constitutionally sterner stuff such as Mr Pagnell or General Dorrien was more than likely to err on the side of severity.

“Well, Devine, and what have you got to say for yourself?” said the chairman. There had been no defence set up; the prisoner had doggedly pleaded guilty. Indeed he could hardly have done otherwise, seeing that he had been caught red-handed in the act of taking one of the leverets out of the “hang,” while the other was found upon him. The head-keeper of Cranston and his subordinate had just been stating to the Bench under what circumstances they had made their capture; moreover, that the culprit was an excessively leery bird, who had long dodged the sharp watch they had kept upon him – and now the justices, having conferred together, were prepared to pass sentence.

“Please your warshups,” said the prisoner sullenly, “I’d bin out o’ work for nigh three weeks, and rent owin’, and nothin’ to keep the pot bilin’ at home. And I set the ‘hangs’ for rabbits, your warshups, which isn’t game, an’ I thowt as how that bit o’ furze were common land, and didn’t belong to nobody. And somehow when the hares got cotched, I took ’em, cos my gal had just come home, and there weren’t nothin’ in the house.”

An eager look came into the man’s swarthy hang-dog countenance. He was a heavy, powerfully built fellow of middle height, and his dark complexion and jet-black hair had gained for him the sobriquet “Gipsy Steve;” that, and the fact that no one knew where he came from, or anything about him. Among his own class he was popularly supposed to be “a man who had committed a murder,” for no reason apparently, unless it were his foreign and uncommon aspect, and a terribly evil look which would come over his dark features when crossed or roused.

Again the magistrates conferred together.

“Gaol’s the word,” said Mr Pagnell decisively. “No fine this time. The fellow’s an out-and-out knave, and now he’s trying to humbug us into the bargain. Why he’s been up numberless times before us for one thing or another, and twice already for poaching.”

“But he was acquitted the first time, and the second there was a doubt,” expostulated the clerical justice – a kindly-hearted man who, although his commission of the peace was congenial to a harmless vanity, disliked punishing his fellow men. “I think we might give him another chance.” So two of the trio being in favour of mercy, stern justice was outvoted.

“Now look here, Devine,” said Colonel Neville, “even if we believed every word of your story – which you can’t expect us to do, considering that you have already been up twice before us on similar charges – it would be no excuse, and you know that as well as we do. If you can’t get work here – and it’s your own fault if you can’t, because you quarrel with everyone who employs you – the best thing to do is to go to some other place, where you can. Anyhow, you’ve broken the law this time and we

can't overlook it, but we are going to give you another chance, though at first we had fully intended sending you to gaol. You will be fined ten shillings, that is five shillings for each act of poaching, and costs; in default a month's hard labour."

The prisoner's countenance, which had lightened considerably at the words "another chance," now fell again.

"Please, Kurnel," he began, "I haven't got five halfpence, let alone ten –"

"Well, we can't help that," testily retorted Colonel Neville, who was feeling the effects of the close, stuffy room. "We have dealt with you very leniently as it is. Next case, Mr Inspector."

So Stephen Devine was removed, and a yokel took his place, charged with cruelty to a horse, then came a couple of disputed paternity cases, the particulars of which, though highly instructive to the student of the manners and customs of the lower orders in rural districts, are in no wise material to this narrative; and so the business of the day proceeded, until at length the three magnates who had sacrificed themselves to the cause of justice in Wandsborough were emancipated and free to return to their respective homes.

"Upon my word, Neville, you do let those rascals down uncommonly easy," observed Mr Pagnell to his brother magistrate, as the two rode homewards. "Poaching is the very thing we ought to stamp out ruthlessly in these days. Why, that ruffian Devine has simply got off scot free."

"Poor devil," answered the kind-hearted Colonel, who under the influence of fresh air and the prospects of no more Sessions for a month, had quite recovered his good humour. "Poor devil, I believe he's been trying to keep square since his daughter came back. But he'll have to do his month, for he'll never be able to pay his fine."

"Won't he! You'll see that he will, and we shall have him up before us again next Bench day. The fellow's an irreclaimable scamp. Well, our ways part here. Good-bye."

About half way between Cranston and Wandsborough, but in the latter parish, and in an angle formed by the footpath across the fields with a deep lane, stands a cottage – one of those picturesque, snug-looking nests which you shall see in no other country in the world – thatched, diamond-paned, and a bit of half garden, half orchard in front, and a background of elder trees and high hawthorn bushes. But, for all its external picturesqueness, an exploration of the interior of this abode would reveal a very poverty-stricken state of things. There is a neglected look about everything, and the rooms, bare of all but a few worthless sticks of furniture – too worthless even for the bailiffs or the pawnshop, seem to point eloquently to the sort of person their occupier would be – shiftless, hang-dog, ne'er-do-well, and not unfrequently drunken. It is the abode of Stephen Devine, *alias* Gipsy Steve, whose acquaintance we have just made.

At the moment when that worthy learns his fate in the Wandsborough Sessions room, there stands in the doorway of his abode a girl. Her dress, appearance, and the rough dusting-cloth in her hand seem to show that she has paused in the commonplace but laudable occupation of tidying up, and is there at the door for a breath of fresh air and a look round; and her coarseness of garb and surroundings notwithstanding, the girl would assuredly attract from the passer-by no mere casual glance, for she is of striking and uncommon beauty. Her almost swarthy complexion ought by all rules to go with jetty locks and dark flashing eyes, but it does not. The masses of hair crowning her well-carried head are light brown, just falling short of golden, and harmonise wonderfully with the smooth tawny skin, and her eyes are large, limpid and blue. The mouth, too, is not the least beautiful feature – full, red and sensuous. She is a tall girl, of splendid build and proportions, and the light, closely-fitting gown displays a figure which would have commanded a fabulous price in the slave-markets of old, and the easy, restful, leaning attitude as she stands in the doorway defines the swelling lines of her finely moulded form. A magnificent animal truly, and withal a dangerous one. Such is Lizzie Devine, the poacher's daughter.

The passer-by referred to above would assuredly pronounce her to be no ordinary cottage girl, and he would be right. She had not inhabited the humble abode where we find her more than a

fortnight; for she had only just returned from what the neighbours vaguely termed “foreign parts,” which vagueness neither Lizzie nor her father were disposed to reduce to definition. Here she was, anyhow, beneath “Gipsy Steve’s” poverty-stricken and highly disreputable roof, and the neighbours looked at her askance, as in duty bound. For this did Lizzie care not one rush. Her movements and pursuits were as mysterious as the antecedents of her father. The gossips hate mystery – therefore, said the gossips, she must have been after no good. Some thought she had been “a play-actress,” some thought even worse. Some thought one thing, some another – but Lizzie didn’t care what they thought. Neither she nor Steve mixed with their neighbours – she from choice, he from necessity; for he was disliked and feared as a quarrelsome and dangerous man. One thing was certain, whatever occupation Lizzie had been pursuing, she had returned home with empty pockets, and this ought to have told in her favour, for the ways of evil are lucrative.

She stands in the doorway looking out over the sunlit fields, and her thoughts are chaotic. At first she wearily wonders whether her father will be discharged with a reprimand, and if not what she can pawn in order to pay his fine. Then her reflections fly off at a tangent. Away in the distance, the chimneys of Cranston Hall appear above the trees, and on these the girl’s clear blue eyes are fixed, while she indulges in a day-dream. Yet she is a hard, practical young party enough, for she is twenty-four, and has seen a very considerable slice of this habitable globe.

Suddenly her frame becomes rigid, and the blood surges to her face, then falls back, leaving it ashy pale. What has she spied to bring about this convulsion? Only a man, of course.

He is advancing along the field path with an easy swinging stride. As she gazes, a large red and white dog comes tearing over the further stile and scampers joyously past his master. The girl stands in a state of strange irresolution, her heart beating like a hammer. He has not seen her – one step inside and he will have passed by. But her chance of retreat is gone. While she is doubting, the man passes the gate, and as he does so looks carelessly up.

Roland Dorrien is not wont to exhibit wild surprise over anything, but the start which he gives as his eyes meet those of the girl before him, proves that his astonishment is genuine.

“Lizzie!”

“You don’t seem overmuch glad to see me anyhow,” says the girl in a hard tone, her self-possession now quite in hand again.

“I don’t know about ‘glad.’ But what on earth are you doing here, and where have you dropped from?” And his eye ran over her from head to foot, taking in her rough, though scrupulously clean, attire.

“Ha! ha! You may well look astonished. Rather different to when we last met,” she said bitterly. “But come inside and we can talk. Don’t be afraid,” seeing him hesitate; “I’m quite alone.”

“Oh, that alters the case materially. You see, I never was one to mince matters. Therefore I don’t mind telling you that this isn’t New York, but a confoundedly gossipy little English provincial place. Moral – One must be circumspect. And now, Lizzie,” he went on, sliding into a big wooden chair, “tell me all about yourself – and – and how it is you’re trying the *rôle* of cottage maiden – and here above all places in the world.”

“That’s soon said. I’m keeping house for father.”

“For father? I don’t quite see. If it’s a fair question, who the deuce is he?”

“Stephen Devine – and he’s now up before the magistrates for catching some of your hares. Yours, mind.”

Roland whistled. Surprise followed upon surprise. Surprise one – to find this girl here at all. Surprise two – that she should turn out to be the daughter of Stephen Devine, the greatest rascal on the whole countryside. He had known her under another name.

“Lizzie, I’ll be quite candid with you. The fact is, this unexpected parent of yours enjoys the reputation of being – well, a ‘bad lot.’ Do you intend to take up your quarters here with him altogether?”

“That’s as may be. Didn’t you know I was here?”

“Know it? How should I?”

“I don’t believe you did. I’m pretty sharp, you see, and the jump you gave when you saw me was no make-believe. I’ve only been here a fortnight, no longer than you have. I came over in the ‘Balearic,’ the steamer before yours. It was queer that we should both have returned home at the same time, wasn’t it? And how do you think I’m looking?”

There was a world of mingled emotions in her tones. Distrust, resentment, bitterness, and a strong undercurrent of passion. A stranger would have been puzzled by this daughter of the people, who talked and looked so far above her station. Her auditor, for his part, was not a little discomfited. The first surprise over, the situation held out endless complications. It was one thing for the prodigal in a far country to pick up a beautiful nobody for his amusement – quite another for the future Squire of Cranston to return home and find that inconvenient young person domiciled at his very door, and owning parentage with a skulking, drunken and poaching rascal, at whom even his own squalid class looked askew. A unit in the crowd at American pleasure resorts was one thing; Dorrien of Cranston at home, quite another. He foresaw grave difficulties.

“How do I think you are looking? Why, first-rate, of course,” he answered. “Improved, if anything.”

“Thanks. I can’t say the same of you. I liked you better yonder in the States. I’m candid, too, you see. But you’re a very great person here, while I – well never mind. And now I had better tell you. I hadn’t the smallest idea that you belonged here when I came – so don’t think I came on purpose. I don’t want to trouble you or get in your way – no – not I. But I can’t quite forget old times.”

The summer air was soft and slumbrous, the place was isolated, and the stillness of the dreamy forenoon unbroken by the sound of voice or footstep to tell of the outer world. Roland’s strong pulses shook his frame with overmastering violence, and his temples throbbed as he gazed on the splendid, sensuous beauty and magnificent outlines of the girl, standing there talking to him in tones and words that contained three parts reproach. And she was gifted with an extraordinarily soft and attractive voice. In a second she was beside him.

“Darling!” she whispered, winding her arms round him, her words coming in passionate torrent. “Darling – I could call you that in the old times, you know. Do you remember those nights at the Adirondacks – the beautiful lake and the moonlight – and ourselves? I see you remember. Why not again – here? The cottage is out of the way – scarcely anyone ever passes even – at night, no one. Father is in trouble. I shall be alone here – perhaps for weeks. You are your own master, are you not – you can come – often, always? It was not so long ago – only a few months. You can’t have grown weary. No one need know – and when it is dark this way is quite deserted – I don’t want to keep you altogether – I don’t want to injure you with anybody. But only one week – one short week if you wish it. Then I’ll go away – right away.”

Her words came in fitful, incoherent gasps, and there was something of the fierce grip of a wild beast in her tight embrace. Like lightning, a consciousness of this flashed through the other’s fired brain, a consciousness of his very senses slipping from him. Would he still yield to the terrible fascination?

“Two’s company, three’s a crowd,” is a sound proverb, even when the third is a dog. Roy, who had been lying in the doorway, suddenly sprang up with a threatening growl, and darted in pursuit of a passer-by, barking loudly. The incident was sufficient. It was a rude interruption, but salutary, so thought at least one of the two.

“This won’t do, Lizzie. As I said before, this isn’t New York, and one can’t be too careful. Now I had better go, at any rate. Good-bye.”

He spoke hurriedly, and acted on his words before she had time to remonstrate. It was a lame conclusion to a stirring interview. All the better – for him, at any rate.

Left alone, the girl stood rigid as stone. Here was the loadstar of her vehemently passionate nature. She had spoken truth in disclaiming all knowledge of Roland Dorrien's whereabouts when she came to Wandsborough. Pure chance had brought her there. Once there, however, she was not long in ignorance as to who dwelt at Cranston – and day by day she had watched that field path as we saw her watching it to-day. Now she was rewarded. Well, was she?

Roland, hurrying down the lane to recall Roy, who was attacking the pedestrian with unwonted savagery, discovered with no little surprise that the latter was Turner, the curate; and it struck him that his apologies for Roy's ill-behaviour were received very stiffly. Then it flashed across him – Roy had rushed out of Devine's cottage – that domicile contained an exceptionally handsome girl, and Turner was a parson and presumably knew everybody. Moreover, parsons were always suspicious fellows, apt to ferret out all kinds of things that didn't concern them – apt, moreover, to ride the high horse if permitted to do so. Thus reflecting, Roland cut short his apologies and left Turner, with a greeting every bit as stiff as his own.

Chapter Ten. “Homo Sum.”

It may or may not be the mission of the fiction-writer to point a moral, in other words to idealise. It assuredly is his function to adorn a tale; in short, to take the world-stage, and the actors thereon, as he finds it and them.

We have said that, in the unexpected reappearance of his former and fascinating acquaintance, Roland Dorrien foresaw a series of grave complications; yet, the first shock over, there entered into his misgivings a widening tinge of satisfaction, and that in spite of the cautious precepts of which he had just delivered himself. A weaker man would have started back in alarm at the turn events had taken and might take – would have persuaded himself that he had made an ass of himself – the male British formula, we take it, for owning that he has done that which he ought not to have done. Not so this one. Whatever he had done he was prepared to stand by, and not a shadow of misgiving entered his mind on that account. But there were other reasons which enjoined to caution. His position, his future prospects, all depended upon how he should play his cards now. And, too, there was another consideration.

He was of a strong, passionate temperament, this man, and the hot blood surged through his veins as he thought of the scene he had just left; thought of his life not so long previously; thought, too, of the opportunity thrust in his path, suddenly and unsought – he who had been trying to persuade himself that the old, wild, reckless times were of the past. But he was a very fatalist, prone to take things as they came, not philosophically it must be owned. Adversity left him gloomy and morose; good fortune, though not elating him, would fill him with a comfortable, if selfish, sense of satisfaction in that he had it in his power to indulge himself in any and every inclination; a power which he suffered not the smallest scruple to hinder him from using. Not very heroic, it must again be owned. But then Roland Dorrien was no hero, only a man.

Given his choice, he had rather Lizzie Devine were now where he saw her last, and three thousand good miles of Atlantic between them. More than that, he had *much* rather such was the case. As it was not, however, and she was located at his very door, so to speak, well, he must make the best of the situation. It had a best side, he reflected sardonically – which was more than could be said of all such situations. Anyhow, he was not going to put himself out about the matter. A thought struck him. He might cut the knot of the difficulty by paying Devine's fine and restoring that estimable rascal to his hearth and home. That would put temptation beyond his reach at any rate. But Roland Dorrien was not the man to confer gratuitous benefits upon anybody; let alone upon one of a class which, in his estimation, knew no such word as gratitude, and an unscrupulous and ruffianly member of the same, at that. And who shall say that his reasoning was not in the main sound? Confer a benefit on a dog, and he remembers it till death; succour a fellow creature – a human being made in God's image, mark you – and the soul-endowed object of your benevolence will assuredly turn again and rend you on sight. Now no one knew this better than Roland, and with a sneer at himself for having suffered himself to entertain for a moment any such quixotic notion, he dismissed the subject from his mind.

Striking the high road leading into Wandsborough, who should he meet suddenly and face to face, but the rector's second daughter. But she was not alone. Walking beside her, carrying a basket – in a word, dancing attendance on her – was the objectionable Turner.

Many a man under the circumstances would have felt, though he might have shown no sign of it, some slight embarrassment, the result of the old cant “guilty conscience” again. Not so this one. He had rather a poor opinion of the fair sex, and although Olive Ingelow had attracted – partially fascinated him, to an extent which no one had ever succeeded in doing yet, and which he would not

own even to himself – for all that, he could not be otherwise than perfectly at his ease in her presence, even under such circumstances as these.

“Well, Miss Olive,” he said lightly, as they met. “On charity bent, I see. Much too fine a day for any such dismal errand.”

“There’s such a thing as duty, Mr Dorrien,” put in Turner, in a tone meant to convey a lofty rebuke, but which only struck the other as divertingly bumptious. “And the parish has to be looked after, and our people must be visited, one might suppose.”

“Oh – ah, I see – quite so?” asserted Roland, placidly and with a stare, as if he had just become aware of the curate’s presence. “And I am sure, my dear sir, that no one performs that onerous task more assiduously and efficiently than yourself.”

The curate bit his lip with suppressed ire. Here was a man whom it was not safe to snub, whom, in fact, it was not possible to snub. Olive, meanwhile, struggled hard to conceal her mirth under cover of somewhat exuberantly caressing Roy.

“Well, good-bye, Mr Dorrien,” she exclaimed, with a bright, mischievous smile. “Duty calls; and that ‘dismal errand’ must be proceeded with.”

“I never did take to that man,” remarked Turner, as they resumed their way. “I don’t care how little I see of him, in fact. The Dorriens are a bad stock, and sooner or later this one will prove himself no exception to the rule, mark my words.”

“I don’t see why you should be so uncharitable,” retorted Olive. “We all think Mr Dorrien particularly nice. How can he help his family being detestable?”

A pertinent question enough, but hardly calculated to soothe the pious young apostle at her side. Rumour credited Turner with more than a friendly regard for his chief’s second daughter, and for once in a way Rumour was right. But as to whether the *penchant* was reciprocated by its object or no, rumour was divided in opinion, the balance of the said division being on the negative side.

“He can’t help that perhaps,” said Turner shortly. “But the man himself is objectionable. A scoffer, and I strongly suspect, an out-and-out infidel.”

“And what if he is?” rejoined Olive warmly. “The narrow-minded and uncharitable self-sufficiency of some people is enough to make an infidel of anybody. I vow I hate clergymen!”

The colour rose to the beautiful dark face as she spoke. Her companion, dismayed and offended, replied, looking straight in front of him:

“Not very flattering to your father, Miss Olive.” She rewarded him with a look of withering scorn. “Just the sort of answer I should have looked for from you. An *infidel*, for instance,” with cutting sarcasm, “would have vastly more gumption than not to know that I credit my father with being a very rare and noble exception to a most stupid and narrow-minded set of men. *He* takes people as he finds them. *He* doesn’t go out of the way to sneer at them because they don’t live in church, especially when he knows little or nothing about them.”

The curate would have liked to hint at the discovery he had recently made, or fancied he had made. But he only replied stiffly:

“If I have offended you I am sorry. But as my company seems unwelcome just now, I will relieve you of it at once.”

“By all means, Mr Turner. Good-morning,” and taking her basket from him, she passed on her way with a scornful bow, leaving her companion standing irresolute, very savage and sore at heart, looking and feeling not a little foolish.

Meanwhile the object of this tiff, far enough away in the contrary direction, felt more disgusted than he cared to admit. But for the presence of that whipper-snapper of a curate, he would have joined Olive, and in about two minutes would have persuaded her to dismiss her errand of charity to the winds, substituting therefor a long delightful ramble on the seashore, or inland among cool shady lanes, or over breezy upland. And by no means for the first time, either. Now, however, it was probable that Turner would lose no opportunity of making himself a nuisance. Parsons, in

Roland's opinion, were extensively given that way, and that Turner had got scent of that other business was extremely unfortunate. Then at the thought of Turner as last seen, he laughed sardonically. A transparently "spoony" man looked an ass at best – a transparently "spoony" cleric showed up as something extraordinary in the way of an ass – and that Turner was in that identical stage of asininity was obvious to our well-worn friend "the meanest capacity," let alone to so shrewd and clear-sighted an individual as Roland Dorrien.

Another meeting was in store for him that morning. In Wandsborough High Street he ran right against his sister and the Miss Nevilles, who insisted forthwith on carrying him back to Cranston. It was luncheon time and hot withal – a comfortable seat in the victoria was not to be sneezed at, so he submitted to capture with the best possible grace. But the incident reminded him that Wandsborough was a confoundedly small place, and that unless he meant to disperse all prudence to the winds it behoves him to be careful.

Chapter Eleven.

Concerning a Midnight Ramble

“Quiet, Roy, old man! Don’t lift up that beautiful voice of yours, or your gallant grandparent will be for abolishing you altogether on the ground that you disturb his slumbers.” It seemed hard to restrain the affectionate creature’s delighted barks over the restoration to his master and temporary liberty. The dog pranced and squirmed; springing up at his master, and whining in suppressed glee. Then he would career up and down the sward, his white ruff gleaming in the moonlight. His master, however, strolled leisurely on. Leaving the ornamental water on his left, he turned out of the drive into a narrow secluded path through the shrubbery, which soon led him into the heart of one of the home coverts. The pathway lay in gloom overshadowed by black firs; the moonlight throwing a pale band across it here and there, when a gap occurred in the trees. Tangled bushes grew on either side right up to the pedestrian’s shoulder, and the air was heavy with a moist fungus-like odour, exuding from the dewy earth and luxuriant vegetation.

“Flap-flap.”

Away went a couple of startled cushats from their dark roost in the firs, followed by a dozen more, the flapping of their wings resounding like pistol-shots in the stillness of the covert. Then a faint rustle in the brake, as of a prowling stoat or weasel making off with stealthy glide. Rabbits scurried off down the path, and Roy, tremulous with excitement, looked up in his master’s face with an appealing whine, though he knew perfectly well that the least movement towards giving chase would be sternly checked. Suddenly the stroller stopped, and, as he gazed straight in front of him, a faint whistle of astonishment escaped his lips. What did he see?

Only a light.

He had reached a point where the ground fell away in front. Some thirty yards further the covert ended, and beyond lay the open fields. From where he stood the light was visible, and might be half a mile away. Seen through the focus of the narrow covert path it twinkled in the distance, looking like an ordinary candle placed in the latticed window of a cottage – which, in fact, it was.

But whatever it was, after gazing at it in astonishment for a few moments, the stroller turned and began to retrace his steps. As he did so the moon slowly soared over the tree-tops, flooding the narrow footpath with light. Suddenly Roy lifted his head, and uttering a quick, short bark, started off from his master’s side, growling ominously.

The path, being in moonlight, enhanced the blackness of the undergrowth. Roland, gazing eagerly in the direction of the cause of his dog’s alarm, could discern nothing in the cavernous gloom.

“Poachers,” he decided uneasily, with a rapid thought of the long odds against him in the event of his conjecture proving a true one; for only a large and daring gang of such marauders would venture to raid into the Cranston home coverts.

The dog’s rage increased. With every hair of his thick coat bristling and erect, he darted forward into the darkness, baying furiously; and in a moment the snap-snap of his jaws, together with a continuous and savage snarling, proclaimed him to be at very close quarters with something or somebody, who had the greatest difficulty in warding off his attack.

“Cawl the dorg off, master,” adjured a thick, gruff voice, not untinged with trepidation.

With some difficulty Roland complied, and in obedience to his peremptory mandate to come out and show himself, there stepped into the moonlight a powerful, thickset ruffian, armed with a cudgel. Mightily astonished, he recognised in the swarthy and scowling features no less a personage than Stephen Devine, the poacher, whom if he had thought of at all it would have been as in Battisford Gaol, doing a month’s hard labour, less about ten days already served.

“Didn’t expect to see me, eh, master?” said the fellow, with a grin, the other not breaking silence.

“Right you are – I didn’t. And now, may I ask, what the devil are you doing here?”

“Thort I was safe in quod, didn’t ’ee, young Squire?” rejoined Devine, advancing a step nearer, with the same evil grin. Roy, who had been crouching at his master’s feet, keeping up a running fire of growls, sprang up at this move, and with his fangs fixed would have made at the intruder, but found himself held by main force.

“Down, Roy! Quiet, sir! I think you’ll be safe in that institution again by this time to-morrow,” answered Roland. “Meanwhile, how the deuce did you get out of it to-day?”

“Haw-haw! Mr Turner ’e paid my fine and got me out. ’E’s a genelman, ’e is. ’E said I ort to be at home, lookin’ after my darter.”

“H’m! A fool and his money are soon parted. However, it’s a thousand pities the cash should be so utterly thrown away. Thrown away, because to-morrow you’ll return to your old quarters. For trespassing here, you understand.”

“Haw-haw! Oh, no, I won’t, sir – not I. You’ll say nuthin’ about to-night – not you?”

“No? And why not?”

“Because,” answered the fellow, lowering his voice, but speaking in an insolent tone – “because I should have such a nice little story to tell their warshups the beaks, and the laryers, and the parties wot comes to see poor coves tried. I should be able to tell how young Squire Dorrien wasn’t above steppin’ down to my cottage o’ nights to keep my gal company like, while her poor old dad’s in trouble. I could tell ’em how I went to get a breath o’ fresh air the night I come out o’ quod, and as how I see young Squire Dorrien a steppin’ along in the dark to see my gal. I could tell as how I follered him until he cotched sight of the bit of light my gal had stuck in the winder to let him know her old dad’s come home again, and young Squire wouldn’t be adsackly welcome that night – and as how ’stonished he looked when he seed it? Fine gal, my Lizzie, ain’t she, Squire?”

“Devilish fine girl! Since you ask my opinion, you’ve got it frankly, and for what it’s worth. And so that’s the little story you are going to amuse the court with, is it?”

“That’s the little story, Squire. No two mistakes about it,” retorted the other, with an impudent leer. “And strike me blind, but it’ll be worth doin’ another month for the fun o’ seein’ the old Squire’s face when I’m a-tellin’ of it.”

Roland laughed quietly, contemptuously – and there was something in his laugh that seemed to undermine the other’s self assurance.

“You may tell your story, Devine – and then – ”

“And then, Squire?”

“And then – you may go and be damned.” The perfect nonchalance of this reply was disconcerting in the extreme. The growing uneasiness which it inspired in the poacher found vent in bluster.

“Blast and blind me!” he snarled. “You don’t seem to care over-much. Yer don’t seem to have heard of Gipsy Steve. But there’s them here as has, and there’s them elsewhere as has, and to their cost. So mind me, Master Squire Dorrien, I say, and you’ll hear more o’ me yet.”

Roland slowly emitted a puff of smoke, and watched it mounting in blue circles upon the damp night air. Then he answered with sneering calmness:

“You were perfectly right in saying I didn’t seem to care over-much. I don’t – and for these among other reasons. In the first place, you won’t tell that story, because, if you do, it isn’t another month you’ll find yourself in for, but several years. Libel, with a view to blackmailing, means penal servitude in this country, remember. In the next place, if you do tell it your daughter will go into the witness-box and deny the whole thing on oath – for even granted the truth of your discovery, I needn’t remind a man of your ’cuteness that she would rather see you hung than give a word of evidence likely to damage me.”

He paused for a moment, noting with a sneer the fury depicted in his listener’s convulsed features.

“Lastly,” he went on, “such a tale told by a person of your well-known respectability, friend Gipsy Steve, wouldn’t affect me in the slightest degree, since nobody would believe a word of it, or at the worst would pretend not to. By the way, Devine, were you ever in the States?”

The start, and the sudden lividness of the other’s countenance plainly visible in the moonlight, were answer enough. With a slight smile Roland went on.

“Ah, I see you have been there. And that being the case you have an advantage over those who have not – that of knowing who’s got the drop. I’ve got the drop on you, friend Stephen Devine, and I mean to keep it. So you shall be in quod to-morrow, and will have an opportunity of entertaining the Bench with your little romance next Petty Sessions.”

The poacher was shrewd enough to recognise the force of every one of Roland’s assertions. So he changed his tone to the inevitable one of the beaten rough. He cringed.

“Don’t be ’ard on a pore feller, Squire. I only wanted to try your grit – and it’s real grit it is. And yer won’t ’ave a pore cove up afore the beaks jest as ’e’s out o’ quod, will yer, Squire. I won’t give you any more trouble – I swear I won’t. Blind me if I do! Say you won’t ’ave me run in, Squire!”

Roland, who could hardly restrain his laughter, eyed the fellow for a moment contemptuously.

“Well, Devine, I’ll let you down easy this time, but don’t let me catch you loafing round here again. And don’t let me hear that you’ve made any capital or mischief out of this in any sort of way,” he added significantly.

“Carn’t ye spare a sovereign or two, Squire? I’m mortal ’ard up,” whined the poacher.

“Not a red cent. Now off you go, left foot foremost. March!” He was determined the other should never have it in his power to say he had given him money, were it but the price of a pint. “And no tricks, friend Gipsy Steve. Clear right away. Why, the dog here would throttle you in a minute at a word from me – and I’m not sure I hadn’t best let him do it – but he’d be certain to get a knock or two over the jop, so that it’s hardly worth while.”

“Good-night, Squire,” said Devine sullenly, as he took himself off.

Roland watched the retreating form of the poacher for about fifty yards, and turned to resume his way homewards. With Roy by his side he had no fear of foul play at the hand of the baffled and exasperated ruffian, and his mind was free to think over the recent encounter. Turner’s motive in releasing Devine was clear, and if the curate turned out to be worth powder and shot he would be even with him yet. And the poacher’s release was not an unmixed evil – at any rate so it seemed at that moment; for, with this low rascal’s voice still fresh in his ears, he felt more than ever inclined to break free from the besetting temptation: as to which it was a case of “needs must” – unless he chose to retain that execrable blackguard in his pay – a thing that he would rather hang himself than do. It struck him, however, that during the short time since his return he had made two enemies, Devine and Turner – the last more powerful for evil, being his own social equal, and because as a parson any mischief he might work would be set down to motives of Christian duty.

Once out of sight, the poacher turned round and shook his fist in the direction of the man who had so thoroughly turned his flank.

“Wait a bit, master!” he snarled through a volley of curses. “Just wait a bit, and blast me dead if I don’t cut that fine cock’s-comb of yours one of these days. And if I don’t, call me a blanked sodger!”

Whether he did or did not earn that martial appellation will hereinafter appear.

Chapter Twelve.

“The Skegs.”

“Father, I’m going down to Minchkil Bay to look up some of your ancient mariners.”

“Are you, dear?” said the rector, glancing up with a pleased smile at Olive, as she stood in his study door attired for walking, and making the sweetest possible picture in contrast to the somewhat solemn and ecclesiastical fittings of the old room. “And are you going alone?”

“Yes, I am. Margaret says she has more than she can do this afternoon, and, besides, those dear old fishermen are my speciality, so I intend to get the credit of keeping them in the way wherein they should go.”

“Ha-ha! The English of which is, that that basket which I see is going down there full of tobacco and snuff and tea, and coming back empty. You know the way to their hearts, you little witch,” laughed the rector, in reality pleased that this volatile favourite child of his should of her own accord undertake a work of benevolence – for anything in the shape of visiting was not her forte. “But I predict that you’ll get a soaking before you’re home again.”

“Now be quiet, you dear old ‘croaker.’ I shall get nothing of the kind, for the afternoon is turning out quite fine,” she answered, leaning over him with her arm on his shoulder and looking down on his desk. “And now I’ll leave you to your sermon-brewing – but oh! – this’ll never do. You really mustn’t write so badly, dad dear, or you’ll stick hopelessly, as you did last Advent – and everyone was making merry over the notion of the preacher not being able to read his own notes.”

“Out upon you for a profane person who dare to invade my *sanctum sanctorum*,” cried her father gleefully, as leaving a shower of kisses upon his forehead the girl sped from the room.

Left to himself the rector unconsciously let fall his pen.

“God keep my darling – and grant her a happy future,” were the words his thoughts would have taken. But with him we have no concern at present, so shall leave him to his meditations.

The little fishing colony in Minchkil Bay lay distant a mile and a half from Wandsborough. Its main features were roughly built cottages, sorrily kept potato plots, pigsties, and smells. The place seemed to have been dropped in a little hollow at the mouth of an attempt at a river, whose chronic state of “draininess,” combined with a whiff of fish in every stage of staleness, not to say putrefaction, engendered the savoury atmosphere aforesaid. There was a good beach, of course, with the regulation complement of weatherbeaten craft, when the latter were not at sea, that is – eke the regulation nets, corks and other fishing gear hanging about on poles. On one side, the high ground beyond which lay the town of Wandsborough; on the other a bare, turfy slope rose abruptly to the summit of Minchkil Beacon, nearly four hundred feet in the air, and whose rugged face to seaward consisted of a succession of almost perpendicular cliffs, broken by many a ledge, where the gulls had everything their own way.

The task which Olive had set herself was anything but congenial. However, she went through with it bravely, and for upwards of an hour she steeled herself to endure the smokiness of the cabins and the ancient and fish-like smells, the maunderings of the old crones and the distracting yells of the babies, without flinching. She had a bright smile and a cheerful word for all as they grumbled or whined – according to temperament – that it was “mortal long since she’d bin near them,” and pretended to think it was not one word for herself and six for the basket she carried, but the other way about. She endured all this right manfully, and when it came to an end, with a sigh of relief, she tripped lightly down the beach to revel in the fresh sea air and a sense of duty done.

“Well met!”

She started at the voice – a genuine start. Truth to tell she coloured.

"This is a piece of luck," went on the speaker. He had been talking with one of the men, and both being behind a large fishing boat, Olive had not noticed them. "I had no idea any of your flock pastured here."

"Yes, they do. But it isn't often I do anything in the way of shepherding them. That isn't in my line at all. In fact – I – I hate it."

The candour of this avowal was delicious. They both burst out laughing.

"I can more than half believe that," he said. "But then why don't you delegate the *rôle* of Lord High Almoner to someone else? There's Turner, for instance. It would be just in his line, I should think."

A queer look, a wicked look, came into the girl's face at the mention of Turner.

"He wouldn't undertake it for me. He's angry with me. Mr Dorrien, don't you hate clergymen?"

"Truth compels me to state that I'm not partial to them as a rule."

"Oh, indeed? And why don't you look shocked at my question and say, 'Er – not very flattering to your father, is it?' or something to that effect? That's how you ought to retort, by every known rule," said Olive, wickedly demure.

"And why don't you look shocked at my answer and say, 'Er – kindly remember that you are reflecting on my father'? That's how you ought to retort, etc, etc."

"Because," answered Olive, when she had recovered from the laughter into which his quizzical reply had launched her, "because I know you were making an exception in his favour as well as you knew I was. So we are agreed on that head."

"Quite so. There's nothing like a good understanding to begin with. And now by way of trying whether it'll continue, let's see if you'll fall in with my idea. We must go for a sail. How does that idea strike you?"

"As perfection," she rejoined, looking up at him with a light laugh. "Jem Pollock has the lightest boat here, but even that's a shocking tub."

It was. By the time they had put a couple of hundred yards between themselves and the beach Roland was fain to admit the justice of the stigma.

"Where are we going to?" asked Olive, as he suddenly turned the boat's head and coasted along the shore.

"The Skegs. I've set my heart on exploring that pinnacle of scare, and was waiting until you could go with me. You were the first to unfold its dread mysteries, and you shall be the first to aid me in braving them."

"Oh! But – I'm just the very least little bit afraid."

"Naturally."

"It's fortunate – or unfortunate – you didn't say where you intended going, or Jem Pollock wouldn't have let us have his boat for love or money."

"He wouldn't?"

"Not he! They're all in mortal terror of the place. To land there would bring them ill-luck for life. They even think they would hardly leave the rock alive. A boy was killed there once trying to get at some sea gulls' nests. They put it down to his temerity in landing there at all."

"A set of oafs! Well, *we* are going to land there – the tide is just right for it – and I wager long odds we don't come to grief in any sort of way. Village superstition will receive a salutary check – and I, even I, shall place your father under a debt to me for my share in exploding such a pagan relic. Look," he broke off, "there would be a good drop for a runaway horse or anyone tired of life."

A bend in the coastline had shut out the fishing village behind them, for they had come some distance along the shore. The face of the cliff at this point rose sheer for a couple of hundred feet, where its surface was broken by a narrow ledge like a mere goat-path. Above this it slanted upwards to nearly twice that height.

"It would, indeed," assented Olive. "That rejoices in the name of Hadden's Slide."

“Does it? And who was Hadden, and what the mischief possessed him to try his hand at tobogganning on such a spot?”

Olive laughed. “Nobody knows. It is an old landslip, and it is supposed that a cottage belonging to one Hadden was carried away with it. But that is very old tradition.”

“A pity. I had quite thought another spectral wanderer had lighted on the place for his posthumous disportings, like my ancestor yonder at The Skegs.”

“Well, he would have a better right, for that is your property.”

“My property!”

“Yes. It is a part of Cranston,” answered Olive, looking surprised.

“Oh – ah! I see. But you said *my* property. Now Cranston is not *my* property, and very likely never will be.”

This remark was made with a purpose. How would that strike her? he thought, and he watched her narrowly. But, however it happened to strike her, she took care that he should be none the wiser.

“Why do you take me up so sharply?” she expostulated with pretty mock petulance. “Really I shall become quite afraid of you if you are going to be so precise. One can’t always think for five minutes or so before making every innocent little remark. Now can one?”

“Of course not. What’s that extraordinary looking fissure there in front? It seems as if a stroke of lightning had split the whole cliff from brow to base.”

“That is Smugglers’ Ladder. It is well worth seeing. I’ve only been there once. We must make up a picnic and go there some day. Are you fond of picnics, Mr Dorrien?”

“Passionately – under some circumstances. But can’t we get as far this afternoon?”

Olive looked dubious.

“It’s a long way. Further than it seems. And father was right. It’s coming on to rain.”

“So it is. Here we are at our destination, though, and we can shelter under the rock.”

Great drops began to plash on the water, and the cliffs above looked dim as through a mist. The tallest of The Skegs reared up its lofty turret overhead, the sea washing over a narrow sloping ledge of rock at its base with a hollow plash. This was the only landing place.

The landing was a good deal more difficult than it looked. There was something of a current swirling round the rock, and the boat, as it got within the recoil of the waves, danced about in lively fashion. Olive, a little overawed at finding herself for the first time in this uncanny place, looked about her in a half-scared, half-subdued manner, as if she expected to behold the spectral hound start open-mouthed from the waves. Then enjoyment of the adventure dispelled all other misgiving.

“Just in time,” she remarked gaily, as, her companion having secured the boat, they gained the desired shelter. A violent downpour followed, beating down the sea like oil. Not a soul was in sight on the lonely and desolate beach, and away on the horizon great cloud banks came rolling. Our two wanderers – three rather, for Roy was not slow to assert his claim – made the best they could of the limited shelter, contemplating the rushing deluge a yard in front of them with the utmost equanimity.

“May as well make ourselves snug while we can. I shall venture to smoke.”

“One of your many advantages over us poor women. Well, why do you look so astonished? Isn’t it?”

“Why do I look astonished?” echoed her companion lazily and between the puffs as he lighted up. “Oh, only because one seems to have heard that sentiment before.”

“Well? And then?”

“And then? Oh – and then – I suppose it astonished me to hear a threadbare sort of a commonplace proceed from you. That’s all.”

Olive tried to feel angry. She could not even look it, however. The tell-tale laugh rose to her eyes, curved the witching little mouth – then out it came.

“Do you know – you are very rude? At least I ought to tell you so – ”

“Another commonplace.”

“Why you deliberately snubbed me?” she went on, taking no notice of the murmured interruption. “Snubbed me like a brother. Shut me up, in fact.”

“Cool hands, brothers – stick at nothing. Ought to know. One myself. But, I say, wasn’t it odd how we first ran against each other that morning – you and I – when you were drawing?”

Now there was nothing in the foregoing conversation as set down on cold-blooded and unfeeling paper which all the world and his wife might not have heard. Nothing in the words, that is. But were that conjugal impersonality within earshot of these two people coasting along a dismal and desolate seashore at imminent peril of a wetting through, or crouched under the rock to avoid it, much gossip might it have chucklingly evolved, merely from the tone of their voices. For the said tone had that subtle ring about it which meant that the owners of these voices were fonder of each other’s society than either would admit to the other – or possibly to him or herself. And it happened that they had enjoyed a good deal more of that society than was known to anyone outside the mystic circle of three, that mystic three bound together in a tacit bond of fellowship – the safer that the third factor in this sodality was by nature denied the gift of human speech. The summer weather was delightful. Meadow and down, country landscape and breezy seashore, were open to all. A chance meeting, such as that of to-day, developed into a ramble more or less protracted, in the most natural way in the world. What more natural either, than that such chance should by some occult and mysterious process have a way of multiplying itself until matters should have reached such a point that the issue would be momentous for weal or for woe to one or both of these two? And then to think that all this should have dated from the too exuberant wag of a dog’s tail.

“And wasn’t it a shame that you should have led me on to talk about your people – and – and – ‘kept dark’ – isn’t that what you call it?”

“It was rather a sin,” he answered languidly. “Good discipline, though. Won’t do the confidence trick again to divert the insinuating stranger.”

Olive made no reply. She was thinking what pickle she would get into if her afternoon’s pastime should transpire. But there was a strong spice of the dare-devil in her composition, and life at Wandsborough was apt to strike her as dull at times. And —

And what?

Never mind what – at present.

So they sat there and talked, heedless of time, and suddenly a gleam of sunshine straggled through the curtain of cloud. The rain had ceased, and behind them, to seaward, the squall, which had now passed, rolled further and further away.

“Now I shall go and prospect for the relics of my ghostly ancestor,” said Roland. “If you don’t mind waiting, I’ll be with you again in a few minutes.”

“Why? Where are you going?”

“To ascend this – er – Skeg.”

“But I want to go too. You must not expect to keep all the honour and glory of this hairbreadth adventure to yourself.”

“You want to go, too! H’m! You’ll slip or turn giddy. The way is infamous.”

Both stood gazing at the wretched slippery path that wound up and around the great rock.

“Oh, don’t be afraid,” she said. “It isn’t the first time. I crossed Hadden’s Slide once, and that’s far worse than this.”

“You, never having seen this, are of course an authority.”

“Rude again,” she laughed. “Now let me have my way.”

Shaking his head dubiously, he allowed her that privilege. But more than once as they came suddenly upon a great yawning rift where the path had fallen away, revealing a perfect *abattis* of jagged rocks beneath, which, although at no great depth, were sufficiently far down to dash either of them to pieces like an egg-shell, in the event of a slip, he began to wish he had never allowed

her to come. Olive, however, seemed to revel in the danger. Her face was flushed with the glow and excitement of the adventure, and her dark eyes shone and sparkled with exhilaration.

They had attained a height of some fifty feet and were stopping to rest. Roy had been left below, his master having entrusted him with something to keep watch over. Two email craft were tacking to and fro on the dull, leaden waters, at some distance off, and a grey-backed gull or two floated stationary against the wind, which, increasing in threatening puffs as they rounded a projecting angle of the rock, tended not to render their perilous foothold any the more secure.

The sky was again growing overcast, and the melancholy and hollow moaning of the waves beneath, swishing and swirling round many a submerged reef, produced a most dismal and depressing effect. Olive, with the dour legend running in her mind, now longed to get away from the place. Her companion seemed in no such hurry.

"This is about as far as we shall manage to go," he remarked, scrutinising the rock overhead. The ledge on which they stood was barely a yard in width. Olive, peering over, noted that at that point the drop was sheer, and looking down upon the pointed reefs with the milky foam seething through and over them – shuddered.

"Take care!" he warned, holding her hand to steady her. "Better come down now, before you begin to feel nervous." He had felt her hand tremble.

"Perhaps we had. Hark! What is that?" she broke off in an awed whisper.

Even her companion could hardly repress a start of astonishment. Apparently from within the rock itself came the deep-mouthed voice of a dog. Olive turned as white as a sheet. The terrible spectre of The Skegs was her only thought.

To her surprise the other burst out laughing.

"Not the ancestor this time," he said. "It's only good old Roy. He's getting tired of his own company down there, and is remonstrating. Possibly, too, he has an eye on some stray crustacean which invites assault, but that he will not desert his post."

Olive was immensely relieved. The colour came back into her pale cheeks and she tried to laugh, succeeding a little hysterically, it must be owned. She had been a good deal scared, and, all things considered, there was some excuse for her. This lonely rock, banned by popular superstition, was dread and forbidding enough in itself. Add to this the gloomy sky and the moaning sea; the rather precarious descent yet lying before them; and remember that the spectral hound was believed in as firmly among the seafaring population as the Deity Himself, and a great deal more feared; that disaster, more or less grave – and sometimes, according to that belief, fatal – had overtaken those upon whose ears the spectral voice had fallen; and it follows that if the girl was momentarily unnerved by a weird and mysterious howl, which, owing to some acoustic peculiarity in its formation, seemed to come from *within* the haunted rock itself, there was every excuse for her.

"How ridiculous of me to forget all about Roy!" she said. "But anyhow, let us go down now."

"We had better," assented he quietly. A very uncomfortable misgiving had flashed across his mind. Far away over the sea a black curtain of cloud was approaching rapidly, its advance marked by a line of troubled water breaking into white foamy crests. He knew that a violent squall would be upon them in a few minutes – and if it caught them on that wretched ledge their position would be horribly dangerous.

"Let me get past you!" he said in an unconcerned voice.

"There; now if you should chance to slip I can easily catch you. We had better get back to Minchkil rather soon, in case the wind rises."

"Oh dear, I forgot that. It looks dreadfully rough already. I feel almost afraid to get into the boat again. Couldn't we wait until Pollock comes to look for us? He is sure to do so when he finds we don't come back."

"Not to be thought of. In half an hour the tide will be all over the landing place. To use a succinct and expressive metaphor, it's a case of 'between the devil and the deep sea.' Careful here!"

he enjoined warningly, holding out his hand to help her over a place where the path had fallen away, leaving an ugly and formidable gap, up which the waves were now shooting in clouds of misty spray.

All would have gone well, but just at the moment of stepping across this gap, a piercing, unearthly shriek rang out in their very ears, as something cleft the air with a swirl and a rush almost between their faces. Olive, already unnerved by her former alarm, uttered a quick gasp, and an ashen pallor spread over her features. For a fraction of a moment she stood tottering; then her eyes closed, she swayed heavily and – a strong arm was flung round her and she was held firmly against the cliff.

“Don’t look down, Olive. You’re quite safe now. Keep perfectly cool and do exactly as I tell you.”

The prompt, commanding tone was effectual. And even then, in the moment of her peril, the girl realised that he had called her for the first time by her Christian name. The convulsive shuddering left her frame, which relaxed its terror-strained rigidity. Obeying his directions implicitly, she kept with him step by step, supported by his ready arm, till they reached the slab of flat rock on which they had landed. Meanwhile two great gulls, the cause of what was within an inch of being an awful catastrophe, circled around and around their disturbed eggs, uttering their harsh and peevish shrieks. Roy, whom they found whining uneasily, jumped up in delight. Once in the boat, however, he lay perfectly still. He was not at his ease though, poor fellow, and began to feel uncomfortable, like a Frenchman crossing the Channel.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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