

Fenn George Manville

By Birth a Lady



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Содержание

Volume One – Chapter One.	5
Volume One – Chapter Two.	9
Volume One – Chapter Three.	14
Volume One – Chapter Four.	17
Volume One – Chapter Five.	20
Volume One – Chapter Six.	26
Volume One – Chapter Seven.	28
Volume One – Chapter Eight.	31
Volume One – Chapter Nine.	34
Volume One – Chapter Ten.	39
Volume One – Chapter Eleven.	42
Volume One – Chapter Twelve.	46
Volume One – Chapter Thirteen.	49
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	50

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Volume One – Chapter One.

Something about a Letter

“He mustn’t have so much corn, Joseph,” said Mr Tiddson, parish doctor of Croppeley Magna, addressing a grinning boy of sixteen, who, with his smock-frock rolled up and twisted round his waist, was holding the bridle of a very thin, dejected-looking pony, whose mane and tail seemed to have gone to the cushion-maker’s, leaving in their places a few strands that had missed the shears. The pony’s eyes were half shut, and his nose hung low; but, as if attending to his master’s words, one ear was twitched back, while the other pointed forward; and no sooner had his owner finished speaking than the poor little beast whinnied softly and shook its evidently remonstrating head. “He mustn’t have so much corn, Joseph,” said Mr Tiddson importantly. “He’s growing wild and vicious, and it was as much as I could do this morning to hold him.”

“What did he do, *zir*?” said the boy, grinning a wider grin.

“Do, Joseph? He wanted to go after the hounds, and took the bit in his teeth, and kicked when they crossed the road. I shall have to diet him. Give him some water, Joseph, but no corn.”

The poor pony might well shake his head, for it was a standing joke in Croppeley that the doctor tried experiments on that pony: feeding him with chaff kept in an oaty bag, and keeping him low and grey hound-like of rib, for the sake of speed when a union patient was ill.

But the pony had to be fetched out again before Joseph had removed his saddle; for just as Mr Tiddson was taking off his gloves and overcoat, a man came running up to the door, and tore at the bell, panting the while with his exertions.

“Well, what now? Is Betty Starger worse?”

“No,” – puff – “no, sir;” – puff – “it’s – it’s – ”

“Well? Why don’t you speak, man?”

“Breath, sir!” – puff. “Run – all way! – puff.”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr Tiddson. “And now what is it?”

“Hax – haxiden, sir,” puffed the messenger.

“Bless my soul, my good man! Where?” exclaimed the doctor, rubbing his hands.

“Down by Crossroads, sir; and they war takin’ a gate off the hinges to lay him on, and carry him to the Seven Bells, when I run for you, sir.”

“And how was it? – and who is it?” said the doctor.

“Gent, sir; along o’ the hounds.”

“Here, stop a minute,” exclaimed the doctor, ringing furiously till a servant came. “Jane, tell Joseph to bring Peter round directly; I’m wanted. – Now go on, my good man,” he continued.

“See him comin’ myself, sir. Dogs had gone over the fallows, givin’ mouth bea-u-u-tiful, when he comes – this gent, you know – full tear, lifts his horse, clears the hedge, and drops into the lane – Rugley-lane, you know, sir, where the cutting is, with the sand-martins’ nestes in the bank. Well, sir, he comes down nice as could be, and then put his horse at t’other bank, as it couldn’t be expected to get up, though it did try; and then, before you know’d it, down it come back’ards, right on to the poor gent, and rolled over him, so that when three or four on us got up he was as white and still as your ’ankychy, sir, that he war; and so I come off arter you. And you ain’t got sech a thing as a drop o’ beer in the house, have you, sir?”

“No, my man, I have not,” said Mr Tiddson, mounting his steed, which had just been brought round to the front; “but if you will call at my surgery when I return, I daresay I can find you a glass of something. – Go on, Peter.”

But Peter did not seem disposed to go on; and it was not until his bare ribs had been drummed by the doctor’s heels, and he had been smitten between the ears by the doctor’s umbrella, that he condescended to shuffle off in a shambling trot – a pace that put the messenger to no inconvenience to keep alongside, since it was only about half the rate at which he had brought the news.

To have seen Mr, or, as he was generally called, *Dr* Tiddson ride, any one would have called to mind the printed form upon his medicine labels – “To be well shaken;” for he was well shaken in the process, and had at short intervals to push forward his hat, which made a point of getting down over his ears. But, though not effectively, Dr Tiddson and his pony Peter managed to shuffle over the ground, and arrived at the Seven Bells – a little roadside inn – just as four labouring men bore a gate to the door, and then, carefully lifting an insensible figure, carried it into the parlour, where a mattress had been prepared by the landlady.

Dr Tiddson did not have an accident to tend every day, while those he did have to do with were the mishaps of very ordinary people. This, then, was something to make him descend from his pony with the greatest of dignity, throwing the reins to the messenger, and entering the little parlour as if monarch of all he surveyed.

“Tut – tut – tut!” he exclaimed. “Clear the room directly; the man wants air. Mrs Pottles, send every one out, and lock that door.”

The sympathising landlady obeyed, and then the examination commenced.

“Hum!” muttered the doctor. “Ribs crushed – two, four, certainly; probable laceration of the right lobe; concussion of the brain, evidently. And what have we here? Dear me! A sad case, Mrs Pottles; a fracture of the clavicle, I fear.”

“Lawk a deary me! Poor gentleman! he ’ave got it bad,” said the landlady, raising her hands.

“Yes, Mrs Pottles,” said the doctor, compressing his lips, “it is, I fear, a serious case. But we must do what we can, Mrs Pottles – we must do what we can.”

“Of course we must, sir!” exclaimed the landlady. “And what shall us do first?”

“Let me see; another pillow, I think, Mrs Pottles,” said the doctor, not heeding the question. “He will not be able to leave here for some time to come.”

Mrs Pottles sighed; and then from time to time supplied the doctor with bandages, water, sponge, and such necessities as he needed; when, the patient presenting an appearance of recovering from his swoon, they watched him attentively.

“He won’t die this time, Mrs Pottles,” said the doctor, with authority.

“Lawk a deary me! no, sir, I hope not,” said the landlady – “a fine, nice, handsome young fellow like he! He’ll live and break some ’arts yet, I’ll be bound. It’s all very well for old folks like us, sir, to die; but I shouldn’t like to see him go that-a-way – just when out taking his pleasure, too.”

Mr Tiddson did not consider himself one of the “old folks,” so did not reply.

“A poor dear!” said Mrs Pottles. “I wonder who he is? There’ll be more ’n one pair o’ bright eyes wet because of his misfortun’, I know. You’ve no idee, sir, how like he is to my Tom – him as got into that bit of trouble with the squire, sir.”

“Pooh, woman! – not a bit. Tchsh!”

The raised finger of the doctor accompanied his ejaculation, as the patient unclosed his eyes, muttered a little, and then, turning his head, seemed to sink into a state of half sleep, half stupor.

The doctor sat for some time before speaking, frowning severely at the landlady, and then impatiently pulling down the blind to get rid of half a dozen lads, who were spoiling the symmetry of their noses against the window.

“I s’pose you have no idea who he is?” said the doctor at last.

“Not the leastest bit in the world, sir. They do say they’ve had a tremenjuss run to-day. But perhaps we shall have some of the gents coming back this way, and they may know him.”

“Precisely so, Mrs Pottles; but you’d better feel in his pockets, and we may be able to find out where his friends are, and so send them word of his condition.”

“Lawk a deary me, sir! But wouldn’t it be wrong for me to be peeping and poking in his pockets? But how so be if *you* wish it, sir, I’ll look.”

“I *don’t* wish it, Mrs Pottles; but it is our duty to acquaint his friends, so you had better search.”

Now Mrs Pottles’s fingers were itching to make an examination; and doubtless, had the doctor left, her first act would have been to “peep and poke,” as she termed it; so, taking up garment after garment, she drew out a handsome gold watch and seal chain with an eagle crest; then a cigar-case bearing the same crest, and the letters “C.Y.,” and lastly a plain porte-monnaie, containing four sovereigns and some silver.

“No information there, Mrs Pottles. But I’ll make a list of these, and leave them in your charge till the patient recovers.”

“Lawk a deary me, no, sir, don’t do that! We’re as honest as the day is long here, sir, so don’t put no temptation in our way. Make a list of the gentleman, if you like, and leave *him* in our charge, and we’ll nurse him well again; but you’d better take the watch and things along of you.”

“Very good, Mrs Pottles – ve-ery good,” said the doctor, noting down the articles he placed in his pocket, and thinking that, even if called upon for no further attendance, through the coming of some family doctor, he was safe of the amount in the porte-monnaie, for he considered that no gentleman would dream of taking that back.

“And you think he’ll get well, then, sir?” said Mrs Pottles.

“Ye-e-e-s – yes, with care, Mrs Pottles – with care. But I’ll ride over to my surgery now, and obtain a little medicine. I shall be back in an hour.”

Mrs Pottles curtsied him out, and then returned to seat herself by her injured visitor, looking with motherly admiration on his broad white forehead and thick golden beard, as she again compared him with her Tom, who got into that bit of trouble with the squire. But before the doctor had been gone an hour, the patient began to display sundry restless movements, ending by opening his eyes widely and fixing them upon the landlady.

“Who are you? and where am I?” he exclaimed. “Let me see, though – I recollect now: my horse came down with me. I don’t think I’m much hurt, though.”

“O, but you are, sir, and very badly, too. Mr Tiddson says you are to be very quiet.”

“Who the deuce is Mr Tiddson?” said the patient, trying to rise, but sinking back with a groan.

“Lawk a deary me, sir! I thought everybody know’d Mr Tiddson: he’s our doctor, and they do say as he’s very clever; but he ain’t in rheumatiz, for he never did me a bit o’ good.”

“Poor dad!” muttered the young man thoughtfully, and then aloud: “Give me a pen and ink and a sheet of paper.”

“But sewer/y, sir, you’re not going to try to – ”

“Get me the pen and ink, woman!” exclaimed the sufferer impatiently.

Mrs Pottles raised her hands, and then hurriedly placed a little dirty blotting-case before her guest, holding it and the rusty ink so that he was able to write a short note, which he signed, and then doubled hastily, for he was evidently in pain.

“Let some man take that to the King’s Arms at Lexville, and ask for Mr Bray. If he is not there, let them send for him; but the note is to be given to no one else.”

“Very good, sir,” said the woman; “but it’s a many miles there. How’s he to go?”

“Ride – ride!” exclaimed the sufferer impatiently, and then he sank back deeper in his pillow.

“I didn’t think, or I would have sent for some one else,” he muttered, after a pause; “but I daresay he will come.”

And then he lay thinking in a dreamy, semi-delirious fashion of the contents of that note – a note so short, and yet of itself containing matter that might bring to the writer a life of regret, and to another, loving, gentle, and true-hearted, the breaking of that true gentle heart, and the cold embrace of the bridegroom Death!

Volume One – Chapter Two.

“Bai Jove!”

Three months after the incidents recorded in the last chapter, Littleborough Station, on the Great Middleland and Conjunction Railway, woke into life; for it was nearly noon, and the mid-day up-train would soon run alongside of the platform, stay for the space of half a minute, and then proceed again on its hurrying, panting course towards the great metropolis; for though such a thing did sometimes happen, the taking up or setting down of passengers at Littleborough was not as a matter of course. Nobody ever wanted to come to Littleborough, which was three miles from the station, and very few people ever seemed to take tickets from Littleborough to proceed elsewhere: the consequence being that the station-master – a fair young man with budding whiskers, and a little cotton-woolly moustache – spent the greater part of his time in teaching a rough dog to stand upon his hind-legs, to walk, beg, smoke pipes, and perform various other highly interesting feats, while the one porter spent his in yawning and playing “push halfpenny,” right hand against left – a species of gambling that left him neither richer nor poorer at the day’s end. But his yawning was something frightful, being extensive enough to have startled a child into the belief that ogres really had an existence in the flesh, though the said porter was after all but a simple, lazy, ignorant boor, with as little of harm in his nature as there was of activity.

But, as before said, Littleborough Station now woke into life; for after crawling into the booking-office, and yawning frightfully at the clock, the porter went and turned a handle, altering the position of a signal, and then returned to find the station-master framed in the little doorway through which he issued tickets, and now pitching little bits of biscuit for the dog to catch.

“Here’s summun a-coming!” said the porter, excitedly running to the door and checking a yawn half-way.

“No! – is there?” cried the station-master, running out, catching up the dog and carrying it in, to shut himself up once more behind his official screen and railway-clerk dignity.

“Swell in a dog-cart, with groom a-drivin’,” said the porter aloud; and then, as the vehicle came nearer: “Portmanty and bag with him, and that there gum’s all dried up, and won’t stick on no labels. Blest if here ain’t somebody else, too, in the ’Borough fly, and two boxes on the top.”

The porter threw open the doors very widely, the station-master tried his ticket-stamper to see if it would work, and then peered excitedly out for the coming travellers.

He had not to wait long. The smart dog-cart was drawn up at the door; and as the horse stood champing its bit and throwing the white foam in all directions, a very languid, carefully-dressed gentleman descended, waved his hand towards his luggage and wrappers in answer to the porter’s obsequious salute, and then sauntering, cigar in hand, to the station-master’s pigeon-hole, he languidly drawled out:

“First cla-a-ass – London.”

“Twenty-eight-and-six, sir,” said the station-master, when the traveller slowly placed a sovereign and a half before him.

“Tha-a-anks. No! Give the change to the porter fellare.” And the new arrival strolled on to the platform, leaving the porter grinning furiously, and carrying the portmanteau and bag about without there being the slightest necessity for such proceedings.

Meanwhile the fly had drawn up, the driver dismounted, and opened the door for a closely veiled young lady in black to alight, when she proceeded to pay the man.

“Suthin’ for the driver, miss, please,” said the fellow gruffly.

“I understood from your master that the charge would be five shillings to the station,” said the new arrival, in a low tremulous voice.

“Yes, miss, but the driver’s allus hextry. Harf-crown most people gives the driver.”

There was no sound issued from beneath that veil, but the motion of the dress showed that something very much like a sigh must have been struggling for exit as a little soft white hand drew a florin from a scantily-furnished purse, and gave it to the man.

“Humph,” growled the fellow, “things gets wuss and wuss,” and climbing on to his box-seat, he gathered up reins and whip, and sat stolid and surly without moving.

“Will you be kind enough to lift down my trunks?” said the traveller gently.

“You must ast the porter for that ’ere,” said the man: “we’re drivers, we are, and ’tain’t our business. Here, Joe, come and get these here trunks off the roof,” and he accompanied his words with a meaning wink to the porter, which gentleman, in the full possession of an unlooked – for eighteenpence, felt so wealthy that he could afford to be supercilious.

“What class, miss?” he said, reaching his hand to a trunk.

“Third, if you please,” was the reply.

“Ah! there’ll be something extry to pay for luggidge: third-class passengers ain’t allowed two big boxes like these here. – Why didn’t you put ’em down, Dick?”

“Ain’t got half paid for what I did do,” said the driver gruffly. “People as can’t afford to pay for flies oughter ride in carts. Mind that ’ere lamp!”

Certainly a lamp had a very narrow escape, as trunk number one was brought to the ground with a crash, the second one being treated almost as mercilessly, but without a word from their owner, who quietly raising her veil and displaying a sweet sad face, now went to the pigeon-hole, regardless of the leering stare bestowed upon her by the exquisite, who had sauntered back into the booking-office.

“Third-class – London,” said the station-master aloud, repeating the fair young traveller’s words. “Nine-and-nine;” and he too bestowed a not very respectful stare.

The threepence change was handed to the porter, with a request that he would see the boxes into the van, which request, and the money, that incorruptible gentleman received with a short nod and an “all right,” pocketing the cash in defiance of all by-laws and ordinances of the company.

Turning to reach the platform, the young lady – for such her manners indicated her to be – became aware of the fixed insolent stare of the over-dressed gentleman at her side, when quietly and without ostentation the black fall was lowered, and she walked slowly to and fro for a few minutes, in expectation of the coming train – hardly noticing that she was met at every turn, and that the gentlemanly manoeuvres were being watched with great interest by station-master and porter.

“Nice day, deah!” was suddenly drawled out; and the traveller started to find that, in place of being met at every turn, her persecutor was now close by her side. Quickening her steps, she slightly bent her head and walked on; but in vain.

“Any one going to meet you?” was next drawled out; when turning shortly round, the young traveller looked the exquisite full in the face.

“I think you are making a mistake, sir,” she said coldly.

“Mistake? No, not I, my deah,” was the insolent reply. “Give me your ticket, and I’ll change it;” and the speaker coolly held out a tightly-gloved hand.

The black veil hid the flush that rose to the pale face, as, glancing rapidly down the line for the train that seemed as if it would never come, the traveller once more quickened her steps and walked to the other end of the platform; for there was no waiting-room at the little wooden station, one but newly erected by way of experiment.

“Now, don’t be awkward, my deah,” drawled the exquisite, once more overtaking her. “Here we are both going to town together, and I can take care of you. Pretty gyurls like you have no business to travel alone. Now, let me change your ticket;” and again he stretched forth his hand. “I’ll pay, you know.”

“Are you a gentleman, sir?” was the sudden question in reply to his proposition.

“Bai Jove, ya-a-a-s!” was the drawled reply, accompanied by what was meant for a most killing leer.

“Then you will immediately cease this unmanly pursuit!” exclaimed the lady firmly; and once more turning, she paced along the platform.

“Now, how can you now,” languidly whispered the self-styled gentleman, “when we might be so comfortable and chatty all this long ride? Look here, my deah – take my arm, and I’ll see to your luggage.”

As he spoke, with the greatest effrontery he caught the young traveller’s hand in his, and drew it through his arm – the station-master and porter noting the performance, and nodding at one another; but the next moment the former official changed his aspect, for the hand was snatched away, and the young lady hurried in an agitated manner to the booking-office.

“Have you a room in which I could sit down until the train comes?” she exclaimed. “I am sorry to trouble you; but I am travelling alone, and – ”

“To be sure you are, my deah,” drawled the persecutor, who had laughingly followed, “when you have no business to do such a thing, and I won’t allow it. It’s all right, station-master – the train will be here directly. I’ll see to the lady: friend of mine, in fact.”

“Indeed! I assure you, sir,” exclaimed the agitated girl, “I do not know this gentleman. I appeal to you for protection.”

Here, in spite of her self-control, a sob burst from her breast.

“Here, this sort of thing won’t do, sir,” said the youth, shaking his head. “I can’t allow it at my station. You mustn’t annoy the lady, sir.” And turning very pink in the face, he tried to look important; but without success.

“I think you have the care of this station, have you not, my good lad?” drawled the exquisite.

“Yes, I have, sir,” was the reply, and this time rather in anger, for the young station-master hardly approved of being called a “good lad.”

“Then mind your station, boy, and don’t interfere.”

“Boy yourself, you confounded puppy!” exclaimed the young fellow, firing up. “I never took any notice till the lady appealed to me; but if she was my sister, sir, I’d – I’d – I don’t know what I wouldn’t do to you!”

“But you see she is not your sister; and you are making a fool of yourself,” drawled the other contemptuously.

“Am I?” exclaimed the young man, whose better nature was aroused. “I consider that every lady who is being insulted is the sister of an Englishman, and has a right to his help. And now be off out of this office, for I’m master here; and you may report me if you like, for I don’t care who you are, nor yet if I lose my place.”

Red in the face, and strutting like a turkey-cock, the young man made at the dandy so fiercely, that he backed out on to the platform, to have the door banged after him so energetically, that one of the panes of glass was shattered to atoms.

“Come in here, miss, and I’ll see that he don’t annoy you again. Why didn’t you speak sooner? Only wish I was going up to London, I’d see you safe home, that I would, miss; only, you see, I should lose my berth if I was absent without leave; and that wouldn’t do, would it? May p’r’aps now, for that chap’s a regular swell: come down here last week, and been staying at old Sir Henry Warr’s, at the Beeches; but I don’t care; I only did what was right – did I, miss?”

“Indeed, I thank you very, very much!” exclaimed the protected one, holding out a little hand, which was eagerly seized. “It was very kind; and I do sincerely hope I may not have been the cause – ”

Here a sob choked further utterance.

“Don’t you mind about that,” said the young man loftily, and feeling very exultant and self-satisfied. “I’d lose half a dozen berths to please you, miss – I would, ’pon my word. Don’t you take

on about that. I'm your humble servant to command; and let's see if he'll speak to you again on my platform, that's all!"

Here the young man – very young man – breathed hard, stared hard, and blushed; for his anger having somewhat evaporated, he now began to think that he had been very chivalrous, and that he had fallen in love with this beautiful girl, whom it was his duty to protect evermore: feelings, however, not at all shared by the lady, who, though very grateful, was most earnestly wishing herself safely at her destination. The embarrassing position was, however, ended by the young station-master, who suddenly exclaimed:

"Here she comes!"

Then he led the way, pulling up his collar and scowling very fiercely till they reached the platform, where the exquisite was languidly pacing up and down.

"Now, you take my advice, miss," said the protector: "you jump into the first cab as soon as you get into the terminus, and have yourself driven home: I'll see that you ain't interfered with going up. I wish I was going with you; and, 'pon my word, miss, I should like to see you again."

"Indeed, I thank you very much," said the stranger. "You have acted very nobly; and though you may never again be thanked by me, you will have the reward of knowing that you have protected a *sister* in distress."

She laid a stress upon the word "sister," as if referring to the young fellow's manly reply to the dandy. But now "she" – that is to say, the train – had glided up, when, turning smartly —

"See those boxes in, Joe!" exclaimed the station-master; and then catching the traveller's hand in his, he led her to the guard. "Put this young lady in a compartment where there's more ladies," he said. "She's going to London, and I want you to see that she's safely off in a cab when she gets there. She's my sister."

"All right, Mr Simpkin – all right," said the guard.

"Good-bye, miss – good-bye!" exclaimed the young man confusedly, shaking her hand. "Business, you know – I must go."

Just at that moment a thought seemed to have struck the dandy, who made as if to get to where the porter was thrusting the two canvas-covered trunks into the guard's van; but he was too late.

"Now, then, sir, if you're going on!" exclaimed the station-master. "Third-class?" he asked by way of a sneer.

"Confound you! I'll serve you out for this – bai Jove I will!" muttered the over-dressed one, jumping hastily into a first-class *coupé*, when, looking out, he had the satisfaction of seeing the young station-master spring on to the step of a third-class carriage, and ride far beyond the end of the platform, before he jumped down and waved him a triumphant salute as the train swept by.

The dandy made a point of going up to that carriage at every stopping – station where sufficient time was afforded; but the fair young traveller sat with her face studiously turned towards the opposite window.

"I've a good mind to ride third-class for once in a way," the gentleman muttered, as he passed the carriage during one stoppage.

Just then a child cried out loudly; and a soldier, smoking a dirty black pipe, thrust his head out of the next compartment with a "How are you, matey?"

"Bai Jove, no! Couldn't do it!" murmured the exquisite, with a shudder; and he returned to his seat, to look angry and scowling for the rest of the journey.

He had made up his mind, though, as to his proceedings when they reached London; but again he was doomed to disappointment; for on his approaching the object of his pursuit in the crowd, he found the stout guard a guard indeed in his care of his charge; when, angrily turning upon his heel, he made his way to the luggage-bar, where, singling out the particular trunks that he had seen at Littleborough, he pressed through the throng, and eagerly read one of the direction-labels.

“Bai Jove!” he exclaimed, with an air of the most utter astonishment overspreading his face; and then again he read the direction, but only again to give utterance to his former ejaculation – “Bai Jove!”

He seemed so utterly taken aback that he did not even turn angrily upon a porter who jostled him, or upon another who with one of the very boxes knocked his hat over his eyes. The cab was laden and driven off before his face so slowly that, once more alone, he could have easily spoken to the veiled occupant. But, no: he was so utterly astounded that when he hailed a hansom, and slowly stepped in, his reply to the driver as he peered down through the little trap was only —

“Bai Jove!”

“Where to, sir?” said the man, astonished in his turn.

“Anywhere, my good fellow.”

“All right, sir.”

“No, no – stop. Drive me to the Wyndgate Club, Saint James’s-square.”

“All right, sir.”

And the cab drove off, with its occupant wondering and startled at the strange fashion in which every-day affairs will sometimes shape themselves, proving again and again how much more wild the truth can be than fiction, and musing upon what kind of an encounter his would be with the fair traveller when next he went home.

There was no record kept of the number of times the over-dressed gentleman gave utterance to that peculiarly-drawling exclamation; but it is certain that he startled his valet by jumping up suddenly at early morn from a dream of his encounter, to cry, as if disturbed by something almost painful:

“Who could have thought it? Bai Jove!”

Volume One – Chapter Three.

Blandfield Court

“Did you ring, sir?” said a footman.

“Yes, Thomas. Go to Mr Charles’s room, and tell him that I should be glad of half an hour’s conversation with him before he goes out, if he can make it convenient.”

The library-door of Blandfield Court closed; and after taking a turn or two up and down the room, Sir Philip Vining – a fine, florid, grey-headed old gentleman – stood for a moment gazing from the window at the sweep of park extending down to a glittering stream, which wound its way amidst glorious glades of beech and chestnut, bright in the virgin green of spring. But anxious of mien, and ill at ease, the old gentleman stepped slowly to the handsome carved-oak chair in which he had been seated, and then, intently watching the door, he leaned back, playing with his double gold eyeglass.

Five minutes passed, and then a step was heard crossing the hall – a step which made Sir Philip’s face lighten up, as, leaning forward, a pleasant smile appeared upon his lip. Then a heavy bold hand was laid upon the handle, and the patient of Dr Tiddson – fair, flushed, and open-countenanced – strode into the room, seeming as if he had brought with him the outer sunshine lingering in his bright brown hair and golden beard. He swung the door to with almost a bang; and then – free of gait, happy, and careless-looking, suffering from no broken rib, fractured clavicle, or concussed brain, as predicted three months before – he strode towards Sir Philip, who rose hurriedly with outstretched hands.

“My dear Charley, how are you this morning? You look flushed. Effects remaining of that unlucky fall, I’m afraid.”

“Fall? Nonsense, dad! Never better in my life,” laughed the young man, taking the outstretched hands and then subsiding into a chair. “Mere trifle, in spite of the doctor’s long phiz.”

“It is going back to old matters, but I’m very glad, my dear boy, that I saw Max Bray, and learned of your condition; and I’ve never said a word before, Charley, but why should you send for him in preference to your father?”

“Pooh! – nonsense, dad! First man I thought of. Did it to save you pain. Ought to have got up, and walked home. But there, let it pass. Mind my cigar?”

“No, no, my dear boy, of course not,” said the old gentleman, coughing slightly. “If it troubles me, I’ll open the window.”

“But really, father,” said the young man, laying his hand tenderly on Sir Philip’s arm, “don’t let me annoy you with my bad habit.”

“My dear boy, I don’t mind. You know we old fogies used to have our bad habits – two bottles of port after dinner, to run down into our legs and make gouty pains, eh, Charley – eh? And look here, my dear boy – look here!”

Charley Vining laughed, and, leaning back in his chair, began to send huge clouds of perfumed smoke from his cabana, as his father drew out a handsome gold-box, and took snuff *à la* courtier of George the Fourth’s day.

“I don’t like smoking, my boy; but it’s better than our old drinking habits.”

“Hear – hear! Cheers from the opposition!” laughed the son.

“Ah, my dear boy, why don’t you give your mind to that sort of thing? Such a fine opening as there is in the county! Writtum says they could get you in with a tremendous majority.”

“Parliament, dad? Nonsense! Pretty muff I should be; get up to speak without half-a-dozen words to say.”

“Nonsense, Charley – nonsense! The Vinings never yet disgraced their name.”

“Unworthy scion of the house, my dear father.”

“Now, my dear Charley!” exclaimed Sir Philip, as he looked with pride at the stalwart young fellow who was heir to his baronetcy and broad acres. “But, let me see, my dear boy; John Martingale called yesterday while you were out. He says he has as fine a hunter as ever crossed country: good fencer, well up to your weight – such a one as you would be proud of I told him to bring the horse on for you to see; for I should not like you to miss a really good hunter, Charley, and I might be able to screw out a cheque.”

“My dear father,” exclaimed the young man, throwing his cigar-end beneath the grate, “there really is no need. Martingale’s a humbug, and only wants to palm upon us some old screw. The mare is in splendid order – quite got over my reckless riding and the fall. I like her better every day, and she’ll carry me as much as I shall want to hunt.”

“I’m glad you like her, Charley. You don’t think her to blame?”

“Blame? No! I threw her down. I like her better every day, I tell you. But you gave a cool hundred too much for her.”

“Never mind that. By the way, Charley, Leathrum says they are hatching plenty of pheasants: the spinneys will be full this season; and I want you to have some good shooting. The last poacher, too, has gone from the village.”

“Who’s that?” said Charley carelessly.

“Diggles – John Diggles. They brought him before me for stealing pheasants’ eggs, and I – and I – ”

“Well, what did you do, dad? Fine him forty shillings?”

“Well, no, my boy. You see, he threw himself on my mercy – said he’d such a character no one would employ him, and that he wanted to get out of the country; and that if he stopped he should always be meddling with the game. And you see, my dear boy, it’s true enough; so I promised to pay his passage to America.”

“A pretty sort of a county magistrate!” laughed Charley. “What do you think the reverend rectors, Lingon and Braceby, will say to you? Why, they would have given John Diggles a month.”

“Perhaps so, my dear boy; but the man has had no chance, and – No; sit still, Charley. I haven’t done yet; I want to talk to you.”

“All right, dad. I was only going to give the mare a spin. Let her wait.” And he threw himself back in his chair.

“Yes, yes – let her wait this morning, my dear boy. But don’t say ‘All right!’ I don’t like you to grow slangy, either in your speech or dress.” He glanced at the young man’s easy tweed suit. “That was one thing in which the old school excelled, in spite of their wine-bibbing propensities – they were particular in their language, dressed well, and were courtly to the other sex.”

“Yes,” yawned Charley; “but they were dreadful prigs.”

“Perhaps so – perhaps so, my dear boy,” said the old gentleman, laying his hand upon his son’s knee. “But do you know, Charley, I should like to see you a little more courtly and attentive to – to the ladies?”

“I adore that mare you gave me, dad.”

“Don’t be absurd. I want to see you more in ladies’ society; so polishing – so improving!”

“Hate it!” said Charley laconically.

“Nonsense – nonsense! Now look here!”

“No, dad. Look here,” said Charley, leaning towards his father and gazing full in his face with a half-serious, half-bantering smile lighting up his clear blue eye. “You’re beating about the bush, dad, and the bird won’t start. You did not send for me to say that Martingale had been about a horse, or Leathrum had hatched so many pheasants, or that Diggles was going to leave the country. Frankly, now, governor, what’s in the wind?”

Sir Philip Vining looked puzzled; he threw himself back in his chair, took snuff hastily, spilling a few grains upon his cambric shirt-frill. Then, with his gold-box in his left hand, he bent forward and laid his right upon the young man's ample breast, gazing lovingly in his face, and said:

“Frankly, then, my dear Charley, I want to see you married!”

Volume One – Chapter Four. Concerning Matrimony

Charles Vining gazed half laughingly in his father's earnest face; then throwing himself back, he burst into an uncontrolled fit of merriment.

"Ha, ha, ha! Me married! Why, my dear father, what next?" Then, seeing the look of pain in Sir Philip's countenance, he rose and stood by his side, resting one hand upon his shoulder. "Why, my dear father," he said, "what ever put that in your head? I never even thought of such a thing!"

"My dear boy, I know it – I know it; and that's why I speak. You see, you are now just twenty-seven, and a fine handsome young fellow –"

Charley made a grimace.

"While I am getting an old man, Charley, and the time cannot be so very far off before I must go to my sleep. You are my only child, and I want the Squire of Blandfield to keep up the dignity of the old family. Don't interrupt me, my boy, I have not done yet. I must soon go the way of all flesh –"

"Heaven forbid!" said Charley fervently.

"And it is the dearest wish of my heart to see you married to some lady of good birth – one who shall well do the honours of your table. Blandfield must not pass to a collateral branch, Charley; we must have an heir to these broad acres; for I hope the time will come, my boy, when in this very library you will be seated, grey and aged as I am, talking to some fine stalwart son, who, like you, shall possess his dear mother's eyes, ever to bring to remembrance happy days gone by, my boy – gone by never to return."

The old man's voice trembled as he spoke, and the next moment his son's hands were clasped in his, while as eye met eye there was a weak tear glistening in that of the elder, and the lines seemed more deeply cut in his son's fine open countenance.

"My dear father!" said the young man softly.

"My dear Charley!" said Sir Philip.

There was silence for a while as father and son thought of the days of sorrow ten years back, when Blandfield Court was darkened, and steps passed lightly about the fine old mansion, because its lady – loved of all for miles round – had been suddenly called away from the field of labour that she had blessed. And then they looked up to the portrait gazing down at them from the chimneypiece, seeming almost to smile sadly upon them as they watched the skilful limning of the beloved features.

A few moments after, a smile dawned upon the old man's quivering lip, as, still retaining his son's hand, he motioned him to take a seat by his side.

"My dear Charley," he said at last, "I think you understand my wishes."

"My dear father, yes."

"And you will try?"

"To gratify you? – Yes, yes, of course; but really, father –"

"My dear boy, I know – I know what you would say. But look here, Charley – there has always been complete confidence between us; is there – is there anything?"

"Any lady in the case? What, any tender *penchant*?" laughed Charley. "My dear father, no. I think I've hardly given a thought to anything but my horses and dogs."

"I'm glad of it, Charley, I'm glad of it! And now let's quietly chat it over. Do you know, my dear boy, that you are shutting yourself out from an Eden? Do you not believe in love?"

"Well, ye-e-es. I believe that you and my dear mother were most truly happy."

"We were, my dear boy, we were. And why should not you be as happy?"

"Hem!" ejaculated Charley; and then firmly: "because, sir, I believe that there is not such a woman as my dear mother upon earth."

The old gentleman shaded his eyes for a few moments with his disengaged hand.

“Frankly again, father,” said the young man, “is there a lady in view?”

“Well, no, my dear boy, not exactly; but I certainly was talking with Bray over our port last week, when we perhaps did agree that you and Laura seemed cut out for one another; but, my dear boy, don’t think I want to play the tyrant and choose for you. They do say, though, that the lady has a leaning your way; and no wonder, Charley, no wonder!”

“I don’t know very much about Laura,” said Charley musingly. “She’s a fine girl certainly; looks rather Jewish, though, with those big red lips of hers and that hooked nose.”

“My dear Charley!” remonstrated Sir Philip.

“But she rides well – sits that great rawboned mare of hers gloriously. I saw her take a leap on the last day I was out – one that I took too, about half an hour before that fall; but hang me if it wasn’t to avoid being outdone by a woman! I really wanted to shirk it.”

“Good, good!” laughed Sir Philip.

“But she’s fast, and not feminine, to my way of thinking,” said Charley, gazing up as he spoke at the picture above the mantelpiece, and comparing the lady in question with the truly gentle mother whom he had almost worshipped. “She burst out with a hoarse ‘Bravo!’ when she saw me safely landed, and then shouted, ‘Well done, Charley!’ and I felt so nettled, that I pulled out my cigar-case, and asked her to take one.”

“But she did not?” exclaimed Sir Philip.

“Well, no,” said Charley, “she did not, certainly – she only laughed; but she looked just as if she were half disposed. She’s one of your Spanish style of women: scents, too, tremendously – bathes in Ihlang-Ihlang, I should think; perhaps because she delights in garlic and onions, and wants to smother the odour!”

“My dear boy – my dear boy!” laughed Sir Philip, “you do really want polish horribly! What a way to speak of a lady! It’s terrible, you know! But there, don’t judge harshly, and you are perfectly unfettered; only just bear this in mind: it would give me great pleasure if you were to lead Laura Bray in here some day and say – But there, you know – you know! Still I place no tie upon you, Charley: only bring me some fair sweet girl – by birth a lady, of whom I can be proud – and then all I want is that you shall give me a chair at your table and fireside. You might have the title if it were possible, but you shall have the Court and the income – everything. Only let me have my glass of wine and my bit of snuff, and play with your children. Heaven bless you, my dear boy! I’ll go off the bench directly, and you shall be a county magistrate; but you must be married, Charley – you must be married!”

Charley Vining did not appear to be wonderfully elated by his future prospects, for, sighing, he said:

“Really, father, I could have been very happy to have gone on just as we are; but your wishes – ”

“Yes, my dear boy, my wishes. And you will try? Only don’t bother yourself; take time, and mix a little more with society – accept a few more invitations – go to a few of the archery and croquet parties.”

“Heigho, dad!” sighed Charley. “Why, I should be sending arrows for fun in the stout old dowagers’ backs, and breaking the slow curates’ shins with my croquet mallet! There, leave me to my own devices, and I’ll see what I can do!”

“To be sure – to be sure, Charley! And you do know Maximilian Bray?”

“Horrid snob!” laughed Charley, “such a languid swell! Do you know what our set call him? But there, of course you don’t! ‘Donkey Bray’ or else ‘Long-ears!’”

“There, there – never mind that! I don’t want you to marry him, Charley. And there – there’s Beauty at the door!” exclaimed the old gentleman, shaking his son’s hand. “Go and have your ride, Charley! Good-bye! But you’ll think of what I said?”

“I will, honestly,” said the young man.

“And – stay a moment, Charley: Lexville flower-show is to-morrow. I can’t go. Couldn’t you, just to oblige me? I like to see these affairs patronised; and Pruner takes a good many of our things over. He generally carries off a few prizes. I see they’ve quite stripped the conservatory. You’ll go for me, won’t you?”

“Yes, father, if you wish it,” sighed Charley.

“I do wish it, my dear boy; but don’t sigh, pray!”

“All right, dad,” said the young man, brightening, and shaking Sir Philip’s hand, “I’ll go; give away the prizes, too, if they ask me,” he laughed. And the next moment the door closed upon his retreating form.

Sir Philip Vining listened to his son’s departing step, and then muttering, “They will ask him too,” he rose, and went to the window, from which he could just get a glimpse of the young man mounting at the hall-door. The next moment Charley cantered by upon a splendid roan mare, turning her on to the lawn-like sward, and disappearing behind a clump of beeches.

“He’s a noble boy!” muttered the father proudly; and then as he walked thoughtfully back to his chair, “A fine dashing fellow!”

But of course these were merely the fond expressions of a weak parent.

Volume One – Chapter Five.

Charley's encounters

“Bai Jove, Vining! that you?” languidly exclaimed a little, thin, carefully-dressed man, ambling gently along on one of the most thoroughly-broken of ladies’ mares, whose pace was so easy that not a curl of her master’s jetty locks was disarranged, or a crease formed in his tightly-buttoned surtout. His figure said “stays” as plainly as figure could speak; he wore an eyeglass screwed into the brim of his very glossy hat; his eyes were half closed; his moustache was waxed and curled up at the ends like old-fashioned skates; and his carefully-trained whiskers lightly brushed their tips against his shoulders. And to set off such arrangements to the greatest advantage, he displayed a great deal of white wristband and shirt-front; his collar came down into the sharpest of peaks; and he rode in lemon-kid gloves and patent-leather boots.

“Hallo, Max!” exclaimed Charley, looking like some Colossus as he reined in by the side of the dandy, who was going in the same direction along a shady lane. “How are you? When did you come down?”

“So, so – so, so, mai dear fellow! Came down la-a-ast night. But pray hold in that confounded great beast of yours: she’s making the very deuce of a dust! I shall be covered!”

Charley patted and soothed his fiery curveting steed into a walk, which was quite sufficient to keep it abreast of Maximilian Bray’s ambling jennet, which kept up a dancing, circus-horse motion, one evidently approved by its owner for its aid in displaying his graceful horsemanship.

“Nice day,” said Charley, scanning with a side glance his companion’s “get-up,” and evidently with a laughing contempt.

“Ya-a-s, nice day,” drawled Bray, “but confoundedly dusty!”

“Rain soon,” said Charley maliciously. “Lay it well.”

“Bai Jove, no – surely not!” exclaimed the other, displaying a great deal of trepidation. “You don’t think so, do you?”

“Black cloud coming up behind,” said Charley coolly.

“Bai Jove, mai dear fellow, let’s push on and get home! You’ll come and lunch, won’t you?”

“No, not to-day,” said Charley. “But I’m going into the town to see the saddler. I’ll ride with you.”

“Tha-a-anks!” drawled Bray, with a grin of misery. “But, mai dear fellow, hadn’t you better go on the grass? You’re covering me with dust!”

“Confounded puppy! Nice brother-in-law! Wring his neck!” muttered Charley, as he turned his mare on to the grass which skirted the side of the road, as did Bray on the other, when, the horses’ paces being muffled by the soft turf, conversation was renewed.

“Bai Jove, Vining, you’ll come over to the flower-show to-morrow, won’t you? There’ll be some splendid girls there! Good show too, for the country. You send a lot of things, don’t you? – Covent-garden stuff and cabbages, eh?”

“Humph!” growled Charley. “The governor’s going to have some sent, I s’pose; our gardener’s fond of that sort of thing. Think perhaps I shall go.”

“Ya-a-s, I should go if I were you. It does you country fellows a deal of good, I always think, to get into society.”

“Does it?” said Charley, raising his eyebrows a little.

“Bai Jove, ya-a-s! You’d better go. Laura’s going, and the Lingon’s girls are coming to lunch. You’d better come over to lunch and go with us,” drawled the exquisite.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Charley, hesitating; for he was thinking whether it would not be better than going quite alone – “I don’t know what to say.”

“Sa-a-ay? Sa-a-ay ya-a-s,” drawled Bray. “Come in good time and have a weed first in my room; and then we’ll taste some sherry the governor has got da-awn. He always leaves it till I come da-awn from ta-awn. Orders execrable stuff himself, as I often tell him. Wouldn’t have a drop fit to drink if it weren’t for me. You’d better come.”

“Well, really,” said Charley again, half mockingly, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Why, sa-a-ay ya-a-as, and come.”

“Well, then, ‘ya-a-as’!” drawled Charley, in imitation of the other’s tone.

But Maximilian Bray’s skin was too thick for the little barb to penetrate; and he rode gingerly on, petting his whiskers, and altering the sit of his hat; when, being thoroughly occupied with his costume, horse and man nearly came headlong to the ground, in consequence of the mare stumbling over a small heap of road-scrapings. But the little animal saved herself, though only by a violent effort, which completely unseated Maximilian Bray, who was thrown forward upon her neck, his hat being dislodged and falling with a sharp bang into the dusty road.

“All right! No bones broken! You’ve better luck than I have!” laughed Charley, as he fished up the fallen hat with his hunting-whip. “Nip her well with your knees, man, and then you won’t be unseated again in that fashion. Here, take your hat.”

“Bai Jove!” ejaculated the breathless dandy, “it’s too bad! That fellow who left the sweepings by the roadside ought to be shot! Mai dear fellow, your governor, as a magistrate, ought to see to it! Tha-a-anks!”

He took his hat, and began ruefully to wipe off the dust with a scented handkerchief before again covering his head; but though he endeavoured to preserve an outward appearance of calm, there was wrath in his breast as he gazed down at one lemon-coloured tight glove split to ribbons, and a button burst away from his surtout coat. He could feel too that his moustache was coming out of curl, and it only wanted the sharp shower which now came pattering down to destroy the last remains of his equanimity.

“Bai Jove, how beastly unfortunate!” he exclaimed, urging his steed into a smart canter.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Charley coolly, in his rough tweed suit that no amount of rain would have injured. “Better to-day than to-morrow. Do no end of good, and bring on the hay.”

“Ya-a-as, I suppose so,” drawled Bray; “but do a confounded deal of harm!” and he gazed at the sleeves of his glossy Saville-row surtout.

“O, never mind your coat, man!” laughed Charley. “See how it lays the dust!”

“Ya-a-as, just so,” drawled Bray. “I shall take this short cut and get home. Only a shower! Bye-bye! See you to-morrow! Come to lunch.”

The ragged lemon glove was waved to Charley as its owner turned down a side lane; and now that his costume was completely disordered and wet, he made no scruple about digging his spurs into his mare’s flanks, and galloping homewards; while, heedless of the sharply-falling rain, Charley gently cantered on towards the town.

“Damsels in distress!” exclaimed the young man suddenly. “Bai Jove!” as Long-ears says. Taken refuge from the rain beneath a tree! Leaves, young and weak, completely saturated – impromptu shower – bath! What shall I do? Lend them my horse? No good. They would not ride double, like Knight Templars. Ride off, then, for umbrellas, I suppose. Why didn’t that donkey stop a little longer? and then he could have done it.”

So mused Charley Vining as he cantered up to where, beneath a spreading elm by the roadside, two ladies were waiting the cessation of the rain – faring, though, very little better than if they had stood in the open. One was a fashionably-dressed, tall, dark, bold beauty, black of eye and tress, and evidently in anything but the best of tempers with the weather; the other a fair pale girl, in half-mourning, whose yellow hair was plainly braided across her white forehead, but only to be knotted together at the back in a massive cluster of plaits, which told of what a glorious golden mantle it could have shed over its owner, rippling down far below the waist, and ready, it seemed, to burst from

prisoning comb and pin. There was something ineffably sweet in her countenance, albeit there was a subdued, even sorrowful look as her shapely little head was bent towards her companion, and she was evidently speaking as Charley cantered up.

"Sorry to see you out in this, Miss Bray," he cried, raising his low-crowned hat. "What can I do? – Fetch umbrellas and shawls? Speak the word."

"O, how kind of you, Mr Vining!" exclaimed the dark maiden, with brightening eyes and flushing cheeks. "But really I should not like to trouble you."

"Trouble? Nonsense!" cried Charley. "Only speak before you get wet through."

"Well, if you really – really, you know – would not mind," hesitated Laura Bray, who, in spite of the rain, was in no hurry to bring the interview to a close.

"Wouldn't mind? Of course not!" echoed Charley, whose bold eyes were fixed upon Laura Bray's companion, who timidly returned his salute, and then shrank back, as he again raised his little deer-stalker hat from its curly throne. "Now, then," he exclaimed, "what's it to be? – shawls and Sairey Gamps of gingham and tape?"

"No, no, Mr Vining! How droll you are!" laughed the beauty. "But if you really wouldn't mind – really, you know –"

"I tell, you, Miss, Bray, that, I, shall, only, be, too, happy," said Charley, in measured tones.

"Then, if you wouldn't mind riding to the Elms, and asking them to send the brougham, I should be so much obliged!"

"All right!" cried Charley, turning his mare. "Max has only just left me."

"But it seems such a shame to send you away through all this rain!" said Laura loudly.

"Fudge!" laughed Charley, as, putting his mare at the hedge in front, she skimmed over it like a bird, and her owner galloped across country, to the great disadvantage of several crops of clover.

"What a pity!" sighed Laura to herself, as she watched the retreating form. "And the rain will be over directly. I wonder whether he'll come back!"

"Do you think we need wait?" said her companion gently. "The rain has ceased now, and the sun is breaking; through the clouds."

"O, of course, Miss Bedford!" said Laura pettishly. "It would be so absurd if the carriage came and found us gone;" when, seeing that the dark beauty evidently wished to be alone with her thoughts, the other remained silent.

"Who in the world can that be with her?" mused Charley, as he rode along. "Might have had the decency to introduce me, anyhow. Don't know when I've seen a softer or more gentle face. Splendid hair too! No sham there: no fear of her moulting a curl here and a tress there, if her back hair came undone. No, she don't seem as if there were any sham about her – quiet, ladylike, and nice. 'Pon my word, I believe Laura Bray would make a better man than Max. Seem to like those silver-grey dresses with a black-velvet jacket, they look so – There, what a muff I am, going right out of the way, while that little darling is getting wet as a sponge! Easy, lass! Now, then – over!" he cried to his mare, as she skimmed another hedge. "Wonder what her name is! Some visitor come to the flower-show, I suppose —*fiancée* of Long-ears probably. Steady, then, Beauty!" he cried again to the mare, who, warming to her work, was beginning to tear furiously over the ground; for, preoccupied by thought, Charley had inadvertently been using his spurs pretty freely.

But he soon reduced his steed to a state of obedience, and rode on, musing upon his late encounter.

"Can't be!" he thought. "A girl with a head like that would never take up with such a donkey! Ah, there he goes, drenched like a rat! Ha, ha, ha! How miserably disgusted the puppy did look! Patronising me, too – a gnat! Advising me to go into society, etcetera! Well, I can't help it: I do think him a conceited ass! But perhaps, after all, he thinks the same of me; and I deserve it.

"Dear old dad," he mused again after awhile. "Like to see me married and settled, would he? What should I be married for? – a regular woman-hater! Why, in the name of all that's civil, didn't

Laura introduce me to that little blonde? Like to know who she is – not that it matters to me! Over again, my lass!” he cried, patting the mare as she once more bounded over a hedge, this time to drop into a lane straight as a line, and a quarter of a mile down which Maximilian Bray could be seen hurrying along – Charley’s short cut across the fields having enabled him to gain upon the fleeing dandy.

“May as well catch up to him, and tell him what I’ve seen,” said Charley, urging on his mare. “No, I won’t,” he said, checking. “Better too, perhaps. No, I won’t. Why should I send the donkey back to them? Not much fear, though: he’ll be too busy for a couple of hours restoring his damaged plumes – a conceited popinjay!”

He cantered gently on now, seeming to take the shower with him, for he could see, on turning, that it was getting fine and bright. But the rain had quite ceased as he rode up to the door of the Brays’ seat – a fine old red-brick mansion known as the Elms – just as a groom was leading the ambling palfrey to its stable at the King’s Arms – there not being accommodation in the paternal stables – a steed not much more than half the size of the great rawboned hunter favoured by Max’s masculine sister.

“Why, here’s Mr Charley Vining!” cried a shrill loud voice, from an open window. “How de do, Mr Vining – how de do? Come to lunch, haven’t you? So glad! And so sorry Laura isn’t at home! Caught in the shower, I’m afraid.”

The owner of the voice appeared at the window, in the shape of a very big bony lady in black satin – bony not so much in figure as in face, which seemed fitted with too much skull, displaying a great deal of cheek prominence, and a macaw-beaked nose, with the skin stretched over it very tightly, forming on the whole an organ of a most resonant character – one that it was necessary to hear before it could be thoroughly believed in. In fact, with all due reverence to a lady’s nose, it must be stated that the one in question acted as a sort of war-trump, which Mrs Bray blew with masculine force when about to engage in battle with husband or servant for some case of disputed supremacy.

“Ring the bell, girls,” shrieked the lady; “and let some one take Mr Vining’s horse. Do come in, Mr Vining!”

“How do, Vining – how do?” cried a little pudgy man, appearing at the window, but hardly visible beside his lady – Mrs Bray in more ways than one eclipsing her lord. “How do? How’s Sir Philip?”

“Quite well, thanks; but not coming in,” cried Charley, from his horse’s back. “Miss Bray and some lady caught in the rain – under tree – bad shelter – want the brougham.”

“Dear me, how tiresome!” screamed Mrs Bray. “But must we send it, Ness?”

Mr Bray, named at his baptism Onesimus, replied by stroking his cheek and looking thoughtfully at his lady.

“The rain’s about over now, and they might surely walk,” shrieked Mrs Bray. “Dudgeon grumbles so, too, when he has to go out like this, and he was ordered for two o’clock.”

“Better send, my dear,” whispered Mr Bray, with a meaning look. “Vining won’t like it if you don’t.”

Mrs Bray evidently approved of her husband’s counsel; for orders were given that the brougham should be in immediate readiness.

“They won’t be long,” she now screamed, all smiles once more. “But do come in and have some lunch, Mr Vining: don’t sit there in your wet clothes.”

“No – no. I’m all right,” cried Charley. “I’m off again directly.”

But for all that, he lingered.

“You’ll be at the flower-show to-morrow, won’t you?” said Mrs Bray.

“Well, yes, I think I shall go,” said Charley. “I suppose everybody will be there.”

“O, of course; Laura’s going. I suppose you send some things from the Court?”

“Yes,” said Charley; but he added, laughing, “What will be the use, when you are going to send such a prize blossom?”

“For shame, you naughty man!” said Mrs Bray. “I shall certainly tell Laura you’ve turned flatterer.”

“I say, Charley Vining,” squeaked a loud voice from the next window, “we’re going to beat you Court folks.”

“We are, are we?” laughed Charley, turning in the direction of the voice, which proceeded from a very tall angular young lady of sixteen – a tender young plant, nearly all stem, and displaying very little blossom or leaf. She was supported on either side by two other tender plants, of fourteen and twelve respectively, forming a trio known at the Elms as “the children.” “I’m very glad to hear it, Miss Nell; but suppose we wait till after the judge’s decision. But there goes the carriage. Good-bye, all!”

And turning his horse’s head, he soon overtook the brougham, when, after soothing Mr Dudgeon, the driver, with a shilling, the progress was pretty swift until they reached the tree, where, now finding shelter from the sun instead of the rain, yet stood Laura Bray and her companion.

“O, how good of you, Mr Vining! and to come back, too!” gushed Laura, with sparkling eyes. “I shall never be out of debt, I’m sure. I don’t know what I should have done if it had not been for you!”

“Walked home, and a blessed good job, too!” muttered Mr John Dudgeon.

“Don’t name it!” said Charley. “Almost a pity it’s left off raining.”

“For shame – no! How can you talk so!” exclaimed Laura, shaking her sunshade at the speaker. “But I really am so much obliged – I am indeed!”

Charley dismounted and opened the carriage-door, handing in first Miss Bray, who stepped forward, leaned heavily upon his arm, and then took her place, arranging her skirts so as to fill the back seat, talking gushingly the while as she made play at Charley with her great dark eyes.

But the glances were thrown away, Charley’s attention being turned to her companion, who bent slightly, just touched the proffered hand, and stepped into the brougham, taking her seat with her back to the horse.

“So much obliged – so grateful!” cried Laura, as Charley closed the door. “I shall never be able to repay you, I’m sure. Thanks! So much! Good-bye! See you at the flower-show to-morrow, of course? Good-bye! —*good-bye!*”

“She’s getting a precious deal too affectionate! Talk about wanting me to marry *her*, why she’ll run away with *me* directly!” grumbled Charley, as Mr Dudgeon impatiently drove off, leaving the young man with the impression of a swiftly passing vision of Laura Bray showing her white teeth in a great smile as she waved her hand, and of a fair gentle face bent slightly down, so that he could see once more the rich massive braids resting upon a shapely, creamy neck. “Have they been saying anything to her?” said Charley, as the brougham disappeared. “She’s getting quite unpleasant. Grows just like the old woman: regularly parrot-beaked. Why didn’t she introduce me? Took the best seat, too! Looks strange! I say, though, ‘bai Jove’ – as that sweet brother says – this sort of thing won’t do! I should like to please the dad; but I don’t think I could manage to do it ‘that how,’ as they say about here. She quite frightens me! Heigho! what a bother life is when you can’t spend it just as you like! Wish I was out in Australia or Africa, or somewhere to be free and easy – to hunt and shoot and ride as one liked. Let’s see: I shall not go over to the town now – it’s nearly lunch-time, and I’m wet.”

He had mounted his horse, and was about to turn homeward, when something shining in the grass caught his eye, and leaping down, he snatched up from among the glistening strands, heavy with raindrops, a little golden cross – one that had evidently slipped from velvet or ribbon as the ladies stood beneath that tree.

“That’s not Miss Laura’s – can’t be!” muttered Charley, as he gazed intently at the little ornament. “Not half fine enough for her.”

Then turning it over, he found engraved upon the reverse:

“E.B. From her Mother, 1860.”

“E.B. – E.B. – E.B.! And pray who is E.B.?” muttered Charley, as, once more mounting, he turned his horse’s head homeward. “Eleanor B. or Eliza – no, that’s a housemaid’s name – Ernestine, Eva. Who can she be? Not introduced – given the back seat – hardly spoken to, and yet so ladylike, and – There, get on, Beauty! What am I thinking about? We sha’n’t be back to lunch.”

He cantered on for a mile: and then as they entered a sunny lane – a very arcade of gem-besprinkled verdure – he drew rein, and taking the little cross from his pocket, once more read the inscription.

“‘E.B. From her mother, 1860.’ And pray who is her mother? and who is E.B.? Nobody from about here, I’ll be bound. But what a contrast to that great, tall, dark woman! And they call her beautiful! Not half so beautiful as you, my lass!” he cried, rousing himself, and patting his mare’s arched neck. “You are my beauty, eh, lass? Get on, then!”

But as Charley Vining rode on he grew thoughtful, and more than once he absently muttered: “Yes; I think I’ll go to the flower-show to-morrow!”

Volume One – Chapter Six.

A Second Meeting

Maximilian Bray, Esq., clerk in her Majesty's Treasury, Whitehall, sat in his dressing-room soured and angry. He had been hard at work trying to restore the mischief done by the rain; but in spite of "Bandoline" and "Brilliantine," he could not get hair, moustache, or whiskers to take their customary curl: they would look limp and dejected. Then that superfine coat was completely saturated with water, as was also his hat, neither of which would, he knew, ever again display the pristine gloss. And, besides, he had been unseated before "that coarse boor, Charley Vining," and the fellow had had the impertinence to grin. But, there, what could you expect from such a country clown? Altogether, Maximilian Bray, Esq., was cross – not to say savage – and more than once he had caught himself biting his nails – another cause for annoyance, since he was very careful with those almond-shaped nails, and had to pare, file, and burnish them afterwards to remove the inequality.

The above causes for a disordered temper have been recorded; but they were far from all. It is said that it never rains but it pours, and as that was the case out of doors, so it was in. But it would be wearisome to record the breaking of boot-loops, the tearing out of shirt-buttons, and the crowning horror of a spot of iron-mould right in the front of the principal plait. Suffice it that Maximilian Bray felt as if he could have quarrelled with the whole world; and as he sat chilled with his wetting, he had hard work to keep from gnawing his finger-nails again and again.

He might have gone down into the drawing-room, warm with the sun, while his northern-aspected window lent no genial softness; but no: there was something on his mind; and though he was dressed, he lingered still.

He knew that the luncheon bell would ring directly; in fact, he had referred several times to his watch. But still he hung back, as if shrinking from some unpleasant task, till, nerving himself, he rose and went to the looking-glass, examining himself from top to toe, grinning to see if his teeth were perfectly white, dipping a corner of the towel in water to remove the faintest suspicion of a little cherry tooth-paste from the corner of his mouth, biting his lips to make them red, trying once more to give his lank moustache the customary curl, but trying in vain – in short, going through the varied acts of a man who gives the whole of his mind to his dress; and then, evidently thoroughly dissatisfied, he strode across the room, flung open the door, and began to descend the stairs.

The builder of the Elms, not being confined for space, had made on the first floor a long passage, upon which several of the bedrooms opened; and this passage, being made the receptacle for the cheap pictures purchased at sales by Mr Onesimus Bray, was known in the house as the "long gallery."

Descending a short flight of stairs, Maximilian Bray was traversing this gallery, when the encounter which in his heart of hearts he had been dreading ever since he came down the night before was forced upon him; for, turning into the passage from the other end, the companion of Laura Bray's morning walk came hurriedly along, slackening her pace, though, as she perceived that there was a stranger in advance; but as their eyes met, a sudden start of surprise robbed the poor girl for a few moments of her self-control; the blood flushed to her temples, and for an instant she stopped short.

But Maximilian Bray was equal to the occasion. He had fought off the encounter as long as he could; but now that the time had come, he had determined upon brazening it out.

"Ha ha!" he laughed playfully. "Know me again, then? Quite frightened you, didn't I? Shouldn't have been so cross last time, when I only wanted to see you safe on your journey. Didn't know who I was, eh? But, bai Jove! glad to see you again – am indeed!"

There was no reply for an instant to these greetings. But as the flush faded, to leave the lace of her to whom they were addressed pale and stern, Maximilian Bray's smile grew more and more

forced. The words were too shallow of meaning not to be rightly interpreted; and overcoming the surprise that had for a few moments fettered her, the fair girl turned upon Bray a keen piercing look, as moving forward she slightly bent, and said coldly in her old words:

“I think, sir, you have made some mistake.”

“Mistake? No! Stop a minute. No mistake, bai Jove – no! You remember me, of course, when I startled you at the station. Only my fun, you know, only that young donkey must interfere. Glad to see you again – am, indeed, bai Jove! We shall be capital friends, I know.”

As he spoke, he stepped before his companion, arresting her progress, and holding out his hand.

Driven thus to bay, the young girl once more turned and faced her pursuer with a look so firm and piercing, that he grew discomposed, and the words he uttered were unconnected and stammering.

“Sorry, you know, bai Jove! Mistook my meaning. Glad to see you again – am, bai Jove! Eh? What say?”

“I was not aware that Mr Maximilian Bray and the gentleman” – she laid a hardly perceptible emphasis on the word “gentleman” – “whom I encountered at that country station were the same. Allow me to remind you, sir, that you made a mistake then in addressing a stranger. You make another error in addressing me again; for bear in mind we are strangers yet. Excuse me for saying so, but I think it would be better to forget the past.”

“Ya-as, just so – bai Jove! yes. It was nothing, you know, only – ”

Maximilian Bray stopped short, for the simple reason that he was alone; for, turning hastily, his companion had retraced her steps, leaving the exquisite son of the house – the pride of his mother, the confidant of his sister, and the pest of the servants – looking quite “like a fool, you know, bai Jove!”

They were his own words, though meant for no other ears but his own, being a little too truthful. Then he stood thinking and gnawing one nail for a few moments before continuing his way down to the dining-room.

“So we are to be as if we met for the first time, are we?” he muttered; and then his countenance lighted up into an inane smile as he thought to himself, “Well, I’ve got it over. And, after all, it’s something like being taken into her confidence, for haven’t we between us what looks uncommonly like a secret?”

Volume One – Chapter Seven.

A Dawning Sense

They were rather famous for their flower-shows at Lexville, not merely for the capital displays of Nature's choicest beauties, educated by cunning floriculturists to the nearest point to perfection, but also for their wet days. When the exhibition was first instituted, people said that the marquee was soaked and the ladies' dresses spoiled, simply because the show was held upon a Friday. "Just," they said, "as if anybody but a committee would have chosen a Friday for an outdoor fête!"

But, if anything, the day was a little worse upon the next occasion, when Thursday had been selected, the same fate attending the luckless managers upon a Monday, a Tuesday, and a Wednesday. But now at last it seemed as if the fair goddess Flora herself had enlisted the sympathies of that individual known to mortals as "the clerk of the weather," and, in consequence, the day was all that could be desired. In fact, the weather was so fine, that the bandsmen of the Grenadier Guards, instead of coming down in their old and tarnished uniforms – declared, as a rule, to be good enough for Lexville – mustered in full force, gorgeous in their brightest scarlet and gold. The committee-men had shaken hands in the secretary's tent a dozen times over as many glasses of sherry, and forgotten to eat their biscuits in their hurry to order the cords of Edgington's great tent to be tightened, so potent were the rays of the sun; while within the canvas palace, in a golden hazy shade, the floral beauties from many a hot house and conservatory were receiving the last touches by way of arrangement.

Lexville was in a profound state of excitement that day, and Miss l'Aiguille, the dressmaker, declared that she had been nearly torn to pieces by her customers.

"As for Miss Bray," she said, "not another dress would she make for her – no, not if she became bankrupt to-morrow – that she wouldn't! Six tryings-on, indeed, and then not satisfied!"

However, Miss l'Aiguille's troubles were so far over that, like the rest of Lexville, she had partaken of an early dinner, or lunch, and prepared herself to visit the great fête.

Lexville flower-show was always held in the grounds of one of the county magistrates, the Rev. Henry Lingon, concerning whose kindness the reporter for the little newspaper generally went into raptures in print, and received orders for half-a-dozen extra copies the next bench-day. And now fast and furiously the carriages began to set down – the wealth and fashion of the neighbourhood making a point of being the earlier arrivals, so as to miss the crowd of commoner beings who would afterwards flock together.

"Ah, Vining! You're here, then, mai dear fellow! Why didn't you come to lunch?" exclaimed Maximilian Bray, sauntering up to the young man, who, rather flushed and energetic, was talking to a knot of flower-button-holed committee-men.

"How do, Max?" exclaimed Charley, hastily taking the extended hand, and giving it a good shake. Then, turning to the committee-men: "Much rather not – would, really, you know – don't feel myself adapted. Well, there," he exclaimed at last, in answer to several eager protestations, "I'll do it, if you can get no one else! – Want me to give away the prizes," he said, turning to Max Bray, who was gazing ruefully at his right glove, in whose back a slight crack was visible, caused, no doubt, by the hearty but rough grasp it had just received.

"To be sure – of course!" drawled Bray. "You're the very man, bai Jove! But won't you come towards the gate? I expect our people here directly."

Nothing loth, Vining strolled with his companion down one of the pleasant floral avenues, but seeing no flowers, hearing no band; for his gaze, he hardly knew why, was directed towards the approach; and though Maximilian Bray kept up a drawling series of remarks, they fell upon inattentive ears.

“Do you expect them soon?” said Charley at last, somewhat impatiently, for he was growing tired of his companion’s chatter.

“Ya-as, directly,” said Bray, smiling. “But, mai dear fellow, why didn’t you come over and then escort them?”

Charley did not answer; for just then he caught sight of Laura, radiant of lace and dress, sweeping along beside Mrs Bray, who seemed to cut a way through the crowd at the farther part of the great marquee.

“Here they are,” said Bray, drawing Charley along; “so now you can be out of your misery.”

“What do you mean?” said Charley sharply.

“Bai Jove! how you take a fellow up! Nothing at all – nothing at all!”

Charley frowned slightly, and then suffered himself to be led up to the Elms party, Mrs Bray smiling upon him sweetly, and Laura favouring him with a look that was meant to bring him to her side.

But Laura’s look had not the desired effect; for Charley stayed talking to Mrs Bray, after just passing the customary compliments to the younger lady.

A frown – no slight one – appeared on Laura’s brow; but in a few seconds it was gone, and, walking back a few paces, she stayed by her younger sisters, with whom Charley could see the young lady of the previous day’s encounter.

And now he would have followed Laura in the hope of obtaining an introduction, but he was arrested by a stout committee-man.

“Would he kindly step that way for a moment?”

With an exclamation of impatience, the young man followed, to find that his opinion was wanted as to the suitability of the site chosen for the distribution of the prizes.

“But surely you can obtain some one else?” exclaimed Charley.

“Impossible, my dear sir,” was the reply.

So, after two or three unavailing attempts to obtain a substitute, Charley gave in; for the owner of the grounds, upon being asked, declared that a better choice could not have been made; the principal doctor shook his head; while Mr Onesimus Bray literally turned and fled upon hearing Charley’s request. So, with a feeling of something like despair, the elected prize-giver began to cudgel his brains for the verbiage of a speech, telling himself that he should certainly break down and expose himself to the laughter of the assemblage; for the grandees from miles round had made their way to Lexville to patronise the flower-show; and at last, quite in despair, Charley walked hurriedly down one of the alleys of the garden, passing closely by the Bray party, and making Laura colour with annoyance at what she called his neglect.

But Charley Vining’s perturbed spirit was not soothed by the anticipated solitude of the shady alley; for, before he had gone twenty yards, he saw Max Bray side by side with the lady who had occupied a goodly share of his thoughts since the encounter of the previous day.

Their backs were towards him, but it was quite evident that Mr Maximilian Bray was exerting himself to be as agreeable as possible to his companion, though with what success it was impossible to say. At all events, Charley Vining turned sharply round upon his heel, with a strange feeling of annoyance entirely new pervading his spirit.

“How absurd!” he muttered to himself. “What an ass I was to come to a set-out of this kind! No fellow could be more out of place!”

Turning out of the alley, he made his way, with rapid, business-like steps, on to the lawn, where the rapidly-increasing company were now gathering in knots, and listening to one of Godfrey’s finest selections. To an unbiased observer, the thought might have suggested itself that there was as bright a flower-show, and as beautiful a mingling of hues, out there upon the closely-shaven turf, as within the tent; but Charley Vining was just then no impartial spectator; and, though more than one pair of

eyes grew brighter as he approached, he saw nothing but two figures slowly issuing from the other end of the alley, where the guelder roses were showering down their vernal snows.

“I should uncommonly like to wing that Max Bray’s neck!” said Charley to himself, as he threw his stalwart form into a wicker garden-chair, which creaked and expostulated dismally beneath the weight it was called upon to bear; and then, indulging in rather a favourite habit, he lolled there, muttering and talking to himself – cross-examining and answering questions respecting his uneasiness.

But the more he thought, the more uneasy he grew, and twice over he shifted his seat to avoid an attack from some conversational friend whom he saw approaching.

“There, this sort of thing won’t do!” he exclaimed at last. “I’m afraid I’m going on the pointed-out road rather too fast. Suppose I take a dose of the Bray family by way of antidote.”

So, leaving his seat, he strode towards where he could see Laura’s white parasol; but his intent was baffled by a couple of committee-men, who literally took him into custody – their purpose being to give him divers and sundry explanations respecting the distribution of the prizes.

Volume One – Chapter Eight.

Shooting an Arrow

To have seen the company assembled in the Reverend Henry Lingon's grounds upon that bright afternoon, it might have been imagined that for the time being no marring shadow could possibly cross any breast; for, gaze where you would, the eye rested upon bright pleased faces wreathed in smiles, groups, whose aspect was of the happiest, setting off everywhere the Watteau-like landscape. But for all that, there were faces there wearing but a mask, and to more than one present that fête was fraught with *ennui* and disappointment. Toilettes arranged with the greatest care had, in other than the instance hinted at, been without effect; while again, where, in all simplicity, effect had not been sought, attentions had been paid distasteful even to annoyance. The Lexville flower-show had assembled together enough to form a little world of hopes and fears; and, fête-day though it had been, there were aching hearts that night, and tearful eyes moistening more than one pillow – the pillows of those who were young and hopeful still, in spite of their pain, though they were beginning to learn how much bitterness there is amidst the dregs of every cup – dregs to be drained by all in turn, earlier or later, in their little span.

But now the band was silenced for a while, and the company began to cluster around a temporary platform erected for the occasion, where the hero of the day was to distribute to the expectant gardeners the rewards of their care and patience.

Not that there is much to be called heroic in giving a few premiums for the best roses, or pansies, or stove-plants; but if the distributor be young, handsome, disengaged, heir to a baronetcy, and rich, in many eyes he becomes a hero indeed – a hero of romance; and bitter as were the feelings of Charley Vining, who declared to himself that his speech was blundering, that he had looked *gauche* and red-faced, and that any schoolboy could have done better, there were plenty of hearty plaudits for him, and more than one bright young face became suffused with the rapid beating of its owner's heart, as for a moment she thought that a glance was directed expressly at her.

Poor deluded little thing, though! It was all a mistake; for Charley Vining went through his business like an automaton, seeing nothing but a simple, half-mourning muslin dress, and a pale, sweet face in a lavender bonnet, which had appeared to him to have been haunted the whole day long by what he had once indignantly called “a tailor's dummy” – to wit, the exquisite and elaborately-attired form of Maximilian Bray.

But at length the distribution was at an end, and gardener, amateur, and cottager had been dismissed. Hot, weary, and glad to get away, Charley had hurried from the group of friends and acquaintances by whom he had been surrounded, when at a short distance off he espied Laura Bray, and his heart smote him for his neglect of the daughter of a family with whom he had always been very intimate.

“Too bad, 'pon my word!” said Charley hypocritically, for at the same moment other thoughts had flashed across his mind. However, he drew down that mental blind which people find so convenient wherewith to shadow the window of their hearts, and strode across the lawn towards Laura, who was apparently listening to the conversation of a gentleman of a more fleshy texture than is general with young men of three- or four-and-twenty.

“At last!” muttered Laura Bray, as Charley came smiling up to where she stood; and now beneath that smile the feeling of anger and annoyance at what she had looked upon as his neglect melted away. True, he owed her no allegiance; but she had set herself upon receiving his incense, and the afternoon having passed with hardly a word, a feeling of disappointment of the most bitter nature had troubled her: the music had seemed dirge-like, the brilliant flowers as if strewn with ashes. At times she was for leaving; but no, she could not do that. She had darted angry and reproachful glances

at him again and again, but without effect, and then looked at him with eyes subdued and tearful, still in vain: he had seemed almost to avoid her, and such pains too as she had taken to make herself worthy of his regard! How she had bitten her lips till the blood had nearly started from beneath the bruised skin! Rage and disappointment had between them shared her breast. Then in a fit of anger she had commenced quite a flirtation with Hugh Lingon, the son of the owner of the grounds, a fat young gentleman from Cambridge, an ardent croquetist, but rather famed in his set for the number of times he had been “ploughed for smalls.” Hugh Lingon had been delighted, smiling so much that the great creases in his fat face almost closed his eyes. He even went so far as to squeeze Laura’s hand, and to tell her that the cup ought to have been presented to her as the fairest flower there; but Charley Vining had not seemed to mind the attentions in the least – he had not even appeared troubled; and at last poor Hugh Lingon was snubbed while uttering some platitude, and sent about his business by the imperious beauty, to make room for Charley Vining, whose pleasant smile chased away all Laura’s care.

Of course she must make allowances for him. He had been busy and bothered about the prize-giving, so how could he attend to her? He was different from other men: so frank and straightforward and bold. She had always felt that he must love her; and after what Sir Philip Vining had hinted to papa, and papa had told mamma, and mamma had pinched her arm and told her in a whisper, what was there to prevent her being Lady Vining and the mistress of Blandfield Court?

“At last!” said Laura, and this time quite aloud, as Charley came up; when, taking his arm, she bestowed upon him a most reproachful glance. “I declare I thought your friends were to be quite neglected!”

“Neglected? O, I don’t know,” said Charley; and then there was a pause.

“Why, you grow quite *distract*,” said Laura pettishly. “Why, what can you see to take your attention there?”

She followed his gaze, which was directed towards a seat across the lawn, whereon were her companion of the day before, one of the “children,” and Max Bray leaning in an attitude over the back.

“Shall we be moving?” said Charley abstractedly.

“O yes, please do!” said Laura. “I’m dying for want of an ice, or a cup of tea. I’ve been pestered for the last half-hour by that horrible fat boy!”

“Fat boy!” said Charley wonderingly.

“Yes; you know whom I mean – Hugh Lingon. So glad to have you come and set me free!”

Charley Vining did not say anything; but he led his companion towards the refreshment-tent, carefully avoiding the open lawn, and taking her, nowise unwilling, round by the shady walks where there were but few people, her steps growing slower, and her hand more heavy in its pressure. And still Charley Vining was quiet and thoughtful; but he led his companion to the refreshment-tent, handed the demanded ice, and then sauntered with her towards the lawn, still gay with fashionably-dressed groups.

“Had we not better get in the shade?” said Laura languidly. “The afternoon sun is quite oppressive.”

“Let’s cross over to Max,” said Charley. “That seems a pleasant shady seat.”

Laura did not speak, but she looked sidewise in his preoccupied countenance, and, evidently piqued at what she considered his indifference, allowed herself to be led across the lawn.

“By the way, Miss Bray,” said Charley suddenly, “you never introduced me to your lady friend.”

“Lady friend!” said Laura, as if surprised.

“Yes, the fair girl that friend Max there seems so taken with. Is it his *fiancée*?” Laura Bray’s eyes glittered as she bent forward and looked intently in her companion’s face; then a tightness seemed to come over the muscles of her countenance, giving her a hard bitter look, as a flash of suspicion crossed her mind. The next moment she smiled; but it was not a pleasant smile, though it displayed two rows of the most brilliantly-white teeth. But, apparently determined upon her course, she increased

the pace at which they were walking till they stood in front of the seat where, with a troubled look in her eyes, sat, listening perforce to the doubtless agreeable conversation of Mr Maximilian Bray, the lady of the railway station, and the companion of Laura in the brougham.

It was with a look almost of malice that, stopping short, Laura fixed her eyes upon Charley Vining, to catch the play of his countenance as, without altering the direction of her glance, she said aloud:

“Miss Bedford, this gentleman has requested to be introduced to you – Mr Charles Vining.” Then, with mock courtesy, and still devouring each twitch and movement, she continued: “Mr Charles Vining – Miss Bedford, *our new governess!*”

Volume One – Chapter Nine.

An Unexpected Protector

Mr Onesimus Bray led rather an uncomfortable life at home, and more than once he had confided his troubles to the sympathising ear of Sir Philip Vining. Laura was given to snubbing him; Max made no scruple about displaying the contempt in which he held his parent; while as to Mrs Bray, the wife of his bosom, the principal cause of his suffering from her was the way in which she sat upon him.

Now it must not be supposed that Mrs Bray literally and forcibly did perform any such act of cruelty; for this was only Mr Bray's metaphorical way of speaking in alluding to the way in which he was kept down and debarred from having a voice in his own establishment, the consequence being that he sought for solace and recreation elsewhere.

Mr Onesimus Bray was far from being a poor man; so that if he felt inclined to indulge in any particular hobby, his banker never said him "Nay," while if Mrs Bray's somewhat penurious alarms could be laid by the promise of profit, she would raise not the slightest opposition to her husband's projects. At the present time, Mr Bray's especial hobby was a model farm, in which no small sum of money had been sunk – of course, with a view to profit; but so far the returns had been *nil*. The old farmers of the neighbourhood used to wink and nod their heads together, and cackle like so many of their own geese at what they called Mr Bray's "fads" – namely, at his light agricultural carts and wagons; despising, too, his cows and short-legged pigs; but, all the same, losing no chance of obtaining a portion of his stock when occasion served.

Moved by a strong desire to possess the finest Southdown sheep in the county, Mr Bray had purchased a score of the best to be had for money, among which was a snowy-wooled patriarchal ram, as noble-looking a specimen of its kind as ever graced a Roman triumphal procession ere bedewing with its heart's blood the sacrificial altar. Gentle, quiet, and inoffensive, the animal might have been played with by a child before it arrived at Mr Bray's model farmstead; but having been there confined for a few days in a brick-walled pig-sty, the unfortunate quadruped attracted the notice of the young gentleman whose duty it was to clean knives, boots, and shoes at the Elms, and wait table at dinner, clothed in a jacket glorious with an abundant crop of buttons gracefully arranged in the outline of a balloon over his padded chest. It occurred to this young gentleman one afternoon when alone, that a little playful teasing of the ram might afford him some safe sport; so fetching a large new thrum mop from the kitchen, he held it over the side of the pig-sty, shaking it fiercely and threateningly at the ram, till the poor beast answered the challenge of the – to him – strange enemy by backing as far as possible, and then running with all his might at the suddenly-withdrawn mop, when his head would come with stunning violence against the bricks, making the wall quiver again.

The pleasant pastime used to be carried on very frequently, till most probably, not from soreness – rams' heads being slightly thick, and able to suffer even brick walls – but from disappointment at not being able to smite its adversary, the ram became changed into a decidedly vicious beast, and, as such, he was turned out into one of Mr Bray's pleasant meadows.

Now, as it fell upon a day, perfectly innocent of there being any vicious animal in the neighbourhood, Ella Bedford had passed through this very meadow during a walk with her three pupils. The morning was bright and sunshiny, and the sight of a fine snowy-wooled sheep cropping the bright green herbage was not one likely to create alarm. Had it been a cow, or even a calf, it might have been different, and the stiles and footpaths avoided for some other route; for the female eye is a strong magnifier of the bovine race, and we have known ladies refuse to pass through a field containing half-a-dozen calves, which had been magnified, one and all, into bulls of the largest and fiercest character.

There was something delightful to Ella in the sweet repose of the country around. The grass was just springing into its brightest green, gilded here and there with the burnished buttercups, while in every hedge-side “oxlips and the nodding violet” were blooming; the oaks, too, were beginning to wear their livery of green and gold. The birds sang sweetly as they jerked themselves from spray to spray, while that Sims Reeves of the feathered race – the lark – balanced himself far up in the blue ether, and poured out strain after strain of liquid melody. There was that wondrous elasticity in the air, that power which sets the heart throbbing, and the mind dreaming of something bright, ethereal, ungrasped, but now nearer than ever to the one who drinks in the sweet intoxicating breath of spring.

There was a brightness in Ella’s eye, and a slight flush in her cheek, as she walked on with her pupils, smiling at each merry conceit, and feeling young herself, in spite of the age of sorrow that had been hers. For a while she forgot the strange home and the cool treatment she was receiving; the unpleasant attentions, too, of the hopeful son of the house; the meeting in the gallery. The wearisome compliments at the flower-show were set aside; for – perhaps influenced by the bright morning – Ella’s cheek grew still more flushed, and in spite of herself she dwelt upon the scene where she pictured two beings addressed by a frank bold horseman; and as his earnest gaze seemed directed once more at her, Ella’s heart increased its pulsations, but only to be succeeded by a dull sense of aching misery, as another picture floated before her vision, to the exclusion of the sunny landscape and the glorious spring verdure. The sweet liquid trill of the birds, too, grew dull on her ear; for she seemed once more to see the same earnest gaze fixed upon her face, and then to watch the start of surprise – was it disappointment? – as again Laura Bray’s words rang on her ears:

“Miss Bedford, our new governess!”

It was time to cease dreaming, she thought.

Walks must come to an end sooner or later; and a reference to her watch showing Ella Bedford that they would only reach the Elms in time for lunch, they began to retrace their steps, when, to the young girl’s horror, she saw that they had been followed by no less a personage than Mr Maximilian Bray, whose first act upon reaching them was to take his place by Ella’s side, and send his sisters on in advance.

But that was not achieved without difficulty, Miss Nelly turning round sharply and declining to go.

“I shan’t go, Max! You only want to talk sugar to Miss Bedford; and ma says you’re ever so much too attentive – so there now!”

Ella’s face became like scarlet, and she increased her pace; but a whisper from Max sent Nelly scampering off after her two sisters – now some distance in advance – when he turned to the governess.

“Glad I caught up to you, Miss Bedford – I am, bai Jove! You see, I wanted to have a few words with you.”

“Mr Maximilian Bray will, perhaps, excuse my hurrying on,” said Ella coldly. “It is nearly lunch-time, and I am obliged to teach punctuality to my pupils.”

“Bai Jove! ya-as, of course!” said Max. “But I never get a word with you at home, and I wanted to set myself right with you about that station matter.”

“If Mr Bray would be kind enough to forget it, I should be glad,” said Ella quickly.

“Bai Jove! ya-as; but, you see, I can’t. You see, it was all a joke so as to introduce myself like, being much struck, you know. Bai Jove, Miss Bedford! I can’t tell you how much struck I was with your personal appearance – can’t indeed!”

Ella’s lip curled with scorn as she slightly bent her head and hurried on.

“Don’t walk quite so fast, my dear – Miss Bedford,” he added after a pause, as he saw the start she gave. “We shall be time enough for lunch, I daresay. Pleasant day, ain’t it?”

Ella bent her head again in answer, but still kept on forcing the pace; for the children were two fields ahead, and racing on as quickly as possible.

“Odd, wasn’t it, Miss Bedford, that we should have met as we did, and both coming to the same place? Why don’t you take my arm? There’s nobody looking – this time,” he added.

The hot blood again flushed up in Ella’s cheek as she darted an indignant glance at her persecutor; but there was something in Max Bray’s composition which must have prevented him from reading aright the signs and tokens of annoyance in others; and, besides, he was so lost in admiration of his own graces and position, that when, as he termed it, he *stooped* to pay attentions to an inferior, every change of countenance was taken to mean modest confusion or delight.

“There, don’t hurry so!” he exclaimed, laughing. “Bai Jove, what a fierce little thing you are! Now, look here: we’re quite alone, and I want to talk to you. There, you needn’t look round: the children are half-way home, and we shall be quite unobserved. Bai Jove! why, what a prudish little creature you are!”

Ella gave a quick glance round, but only to find that it was just as Max had said. There was a sheep feeding in the field, whose hedges were of the highest; and for aught she could see to the contrary, there was no assistance within a mile, while Max Bray had caught her hand in his, and was barring the route.

Regularly driven to bay, Ella turned upon him with flaming face, trying at the same moment to snatch away her hand, which, however, he held the tighter, crushing her fingers painfully, though she never winced.

“Mr Bray,” she exclaimed, “do you wish me to appeal to your father for protection?”

“Of course not!” he drawled. “But there now – bai Jove! what is the use of your putting on all those fine airs and coy ways? Do you think I’m blind, or don’t understand what they mean? Come now, just listen to what I say.”

Before Ella could avoid his grasp, he had thrown one arm round her waist, when he started back as if stung, for a loud mocking laugh came from the stile.

“Ha, ha, ha! I thought so! I knew you wanted to talk sugar to Miss Bedford.”

At the same moment Max and Ella had seen the merry delighted countenance of Nelly, who had crept silently back, but now darted away like a deer.

A cold chill shot through Ella Bedford’s breast, and it was with the greatest difficulty that she could force back the angry tears as she saw that her future was completely marred at the Elms – how that she was, as it were, at the mercy of the young girl placed in her charge, unless she forestalled any tattling by complaining herself of the treatment to which she had been subjected.

“There, you needn’t mind her!” exclaimed Max, who partly read her thoughts. “I can keep her saucy little tongue quiet. You need not be afraid.”

“Afraid!” exclaimed Ella indignantly, as she turned upon the speaker with flashing eyes, and vainly endeavoured to free the hand Max had again secured.

“Handsomest every moment, bai Jove!” exclaimed Max. “You’ve no idea how a little colour becomes you! Now, I just want to say a few – ”

“Are you aware, sir, that this is a cruel outrage? – one of which no gentleman would be guilty.”

“Outrage? Nonsense! What stuff you do talk, my dear! I should have thought that, after what I said to you at the flower-show, you would have been a little more gentle, and not gone flaming out at a poor fellow like this. You see, I love you to distraction, Miss Bedford – I do indeed. Bai Jove, I couldn’t have thought that it was possible for any one to have made such an impression upon me. Case of love at first sight – bai Jove, it was! And here you are so cruel – so hard – so – ’Pon my soul I hardly know what to call it – I don’t, bai Jove!”

“Mr Bray,” said Ella passionately, “every word that you address to me in this way is an insult. As the instructor of your sisters, your duty should be to protect, not outrage my feelings at every encounter.”

She struggled to release her hand, but vainly. Each moment his grasp grew firmer, and, like some dove in the claws of a hawk, she panted to escape. She felt that it would be cowardly to call

for help; besides, it would be only making a scene in the event of assistance being near enough to respond to her appeal; and she had no wish to figure as an injured heroine or damsel in distress. Her breast heaved, and an angry flush suffused her cheeks, while, in spite of every effort, the great hot tears of annoyance and misery would force themselves to her eyes. She knew it not – though she saw the exquisite's gaze fixed more and more intently upon her – she knew not how excitement was heightening the soft beauty of her face, brightening her eyes, suffusing her countenance with a warm glow, and lending animation where sorrow had left all tinged with a sad air of gloom – an aspect that had settled down again after the brightness given by the early part of her walk.

"There now, don't be foolish, and hurt the poor little white hand! You can't get away, my little birdie; for I've caught you fast. And don't get making those bright eyes all dull and red with tears. I don't like crying – I don't indeed, bai Jove! Now let's walk gently along together. There – that's the way. And now we can talk, and you can listen to what I have to say."

In spite of her resistance, he drew the young girl's hand through his arm, and held it thus firmly. But to walk on, Ella absolutely refused; and stopping short, she tried to appeal to his feelings.

"Mr Bray," she said, "as a gentleman, I ask you to consider my position. You have already done me irreparable injury in the eyes of your sister; and now by this persecution you would force me to leave my situation, perhaps with ignominy. I appeal to your feelings – to your honour – to cease this unmanly pursuit."

"Ah, that's better!" he said mockingly. "But I'm afraid, my dear, you have a strong tinge of the romantic in your ideas. I see, you read too many novels; but you'll come round in time to my way of thinking, only don't try on so much of this silly prudishness, my dear. It don't do, you know, because I can see through it. There, now, don't struggle; only I'm not going to let you go without something to remember this meeting by. Now don't be silly! It's no robbery – only an exchange. I want that little ring to hang at my watch-chain, and you can wear this one for my sake. There!" he exclaimed triumphantly, as he succeeded in drawing a single gem pearl ring from her finger and placing one he drew from his pocket in its place, Ella the while alternately pale and red with suppressed anger, for she had vainly looked around for help; and now forcing back her tears, and scorning to display any farther weakness, she took off the ring and dashed it upon the path.

"What a silly little thing it is!" laughed Bray, who considered that he was honouring her with his attentions, however rough they might be. "But it's of no use: you don't go till that ring is on your darling little finger – you don't, bai Jove!"

Was there to be no help? A minute before, she would have refused assistance; for she did not believe that any one professing to be a gentleman would so utterly have turned a deaf ear to her protestations and appeals. From some low drink-maddened ruffian she might have fled in horror, shrieking, perhaps, for help; but here, with the son of her employers, Ella had believed that her indignant rejection of the insulting addresses would have been sufficient to set her at liberty. She was, then, half stunned as to her mental faculties on finding that her words were mocked at, her appeals disregarded, and even her indignant looks treated as feints and coyness. But then, poor girl, she did not know Maximilian Bray, and that his gross nature was not one that could grasp the character of a good and pure-hearted woman. It was something he could not understand. He measured other natures by his own, and acted accordingly. Once only the thoughts of Ella Bedford flew towards Charles Vining, as if, in spite of herself, they sought in him her natural protector, but only for an instant; and now, seriously alarmed, she gazed earnestly round for aid. She would have even gladly welcomed the mocking face of Nelly, and have called her to her side. But no, Nelly had hurried away, content and laughing at what she had seen: and now from the indignant flush, Ella's face began to pale into a look of genuine alarm. But help was at hand.

Still holding tightly by her hand, Max Bray stooped to recover the ring, when, suddenly as a flash of light, a white rushing form seemed to dart through the air, catching Max Bray, as he bent

down, right upon the crown of his hat, crushing it over his eyes, and tumbling him over and over, as a fierce “Ba-a-a-a!” rung upon his astonished ears.

Set free by this unexpected preserver, Ella, panting and alarmed, fled for the stile and climbed it, when, looking back, she saw that she was safe, while Max Bray rose, struggling to free himself from his crushed-down hat; but only for his father’s prize Southdown to dart at and roll him over again: when, once more rising to his feet, he ran, frightened and blindfold, as hard as he could across the field in the opposite direction.

Ella saw no more. It did not fall to her lot to see Max Bray make a blind bound – a leap in the dark – from his unseen pursuer, and land in the midst of a dense blackthorn hedge, out of which he struggled, torn of flesh and coat, to free himself from the extinguishing hat, and gaze through the hedge-gap at his assailant, who stood upon the other side shaking his head, and bucking and running forward “ba-a-a-ing” furiously.

For a few moments Max Bray was speechless with rage and astonishment. To think that he, Maximilian Bray, should have been bowled over, battered, and made to flee ignominiously by a sheep! It was positively awful.

“You – you – you beast! you – you woolly brute!” he stuttered at last. “I’ll – I’ll – bai Jove, I’ll shoot you as sure as you’re there! – I will, bai Jove!”

But now the worst of the affair flashed upon him, making torn clothes, thorns in the flesh, and battered hat seem as nothing, though these were in his estimation no trifles; but this was the second time within the past few days that he had been wounded in his self-esteem.

“And now there’s that confounded coy jade run home laughing at me – I’m sure she has!” he muttered. “Not that there was anything to laugh at; but never mind: ‘Every dog – ’ My turn will come! But to be upset like this! And – what? you won’t let me come through!”

There was no doubt about it. The Southdown was keeping guard at the stile, and Max Bray, after trying to repair damages, was glad to make his way back to the Elms by a circuitous route, and then to creep in by the side-door unseen, vowing vengeance the while against those who had brought him to that pass.

“But I’ll make an end of the sheep!” he exclaimed – “I will, bai Jove!”

Volume One – Chapter Ten.

Ella's Comforter

Most persons possessed of feeling will readily agree that scarcely anything could be more unpleasant than for a gentleman, bent upon making himself attractive to a lady, to meet with such a misfortune as to be taken, while in a stooping position, for a defiant beast, and to have to encounter the full force of a woolly avalanche, or so much live mutton discharged, as from a catapult, right upon the crown of his head. Max Bray was extremely sore afterwards – sore in person and temper: but the most extraordinary part of the affair is, that his head never ached from the fierce blow. It would perhaps be invidious to offer remarks about thickness, or to make comparisons; but certainly for two or three days after, when he encountered Ella Bedford, Max Bray did wear, in spite of his effrontery, a decidedly sheepish air. But not for a longer period. At the end of that time a great deal of the soreness had worn off, and he was nearly himself again.

But with Ella Bedford the case was different. She was hourly awakening to the fact that hers was to be no pleasant sojourn at the Elms; and with tearful eyes she thought of the happy old days at home before sickness fell upon the little country vicarage, and then death removed the simple, good-hearted village clergyman from his flock, to be followed all too soon by his mourning wife.

"I have nothing to leave you, my child – nothing!" were almost the father's last words. "Always poor and in delicate health, I could only keep out of debt. But your mother, help her – be kind to her," he whispered.

Ella Bedford's help and kindness were only called for during a few months; and then it fell to her lot to seek for some situation where the accomplishments, for the most part taught by her father, might be the means of providing her with a home and some small pittance.

By means of advertising, she had succeeded in obtaining the post of governess at the Elms, and it was while on her way to fill that post that she had encountered the hopeful scion of the house of Bray. It was, then, with a feeling almost of horror that she met him again at the Elms, and her first thought was that she must flee directly – leave the house at once; her next that she ought to relate her adventure to some one. But who would sympathise with her, and rightly view it all? She shrank from harsh loud-voiced Mrs Bray; and, almost from the first meeting, Laura had seemed to take a dislike to her – one which she made no scruple of displaying – while, as a rule, she tried all she could to how the immeasurable distance she considered that there existed between her and the dependent.

On the day of the sheep encounter, agitated, wounded, and with great difficulty keeping back her tears, Ella hurried on; and had Max Bray's position been one of danger, it is very doubtful whether any assistance would have been rendered him through Ella, so thoroughly was she taken up with her own position. She felt that she must be questioned respecting her charges reaching home alone; they would certainly talk about her staying behind with their brother, and the culminating point would be reached when Miss Nelly declared what she had seen.

Well might the poor girl's heart beat as she hastened on; for it seemed as if, through the persecution of a fop, her prospects in life were to be blighted at the outset. But there's a silver lining to every cloud, it is said; and before Ella had gone half a mile, to her great joy she saw Nelly seated with her sisters by a bank, gathering wild flowers, and then tossing them away.

Fortune favoured her too when they reached the Elms: luncheon – the children's dinner – had been put back for half an hour because Mr Maximilian had not returned.

"Mr Maximilian" did not show himself at all at table that day, and, glad of the respite, Ella sought her bedroom directly after, to think over the past, and try and decide what ought to be her course under the circumstances. What would she not have given for the loving counsel of some gentle, true-hearted woman! But she felt that she was quite alone – alone in the vast weary world; and as

such thoughts sprang up came the recollection of the happy bygone, sweeping all before it; and at last, unable to bear up any longer, she sank upon her knees by the bedside, weeping and sobbing as if her poor torn heart would break.

She struggled hard to keep the tears back, but in vain now – they would come, and with them fierce hysterical sobs, such as had never burst before from her breast. Then would come a cessation, as she asked herself whether she ought not to acquaint Mrs Bray with her son's behaviour? – or would it be making too much of the affair? Then she reviewed her own conduct, and tried to find in it some flaw – some want of reserve which had brought upon her the insults to which she had been subjected. But, as might be expected, the search was vain, and once more she bowed down her head and sobbed bitterly for the happy past, the painful present, and the dreary future.

It was in the midst of her passionate outbursts that she suddenly felt some one kneel beside her, and through her tears she saw, with wonder, the friendly and weeping face of Nelly, who had crept unperceived into the room.

“O, Miss Bedford! Dear, dear Miss Bedford, please don't – don't!” sobbed the girl, as, throwing her long thin arms round Ella, she drew her face to her own hard bony breast, soothing, kissing, and fondling her tenderly, as might a mother. “Please – please don't cry so, or you'll break my heart; for, though you don't think it, I do love you so – so much! You're so gentle, and kind, and wise, and beautiful, that – that – that – O, and you're crying more than ever!”

Poor Nelly burst out almost into a howl of grief as she spoke; but, like her words, it was genuine, and as she pressed her rough sympathies upon her weeping governess, Ella's sobs grew less laboured, and she clung convulsively to the slight form at her side.

“There – there – there!” half sobbed Nelly. “Try not to cry, dear; do please try, dear Miss Bedford; for indeed, indeed it does hurt me so! You made me to love you, and I can't bear to see you like this!”

So energetic, indeed, was Nelly's grief, that, as she spoke, she kicked out behind, overturning a bedroom chair; but it passed unnoticed.

“They say I'm a child; but I'm not, you know!” she said half passionately. “I'm sixteen nearly, and I can see as well as other people. Yes, and feel too! I'm not a child; and if Laury raps my knuckles again, I'll bite her, see if I don't! But I know what you're crying about, Miss Bedford, and I saw you wanted to cry all dinner-time, only you couldn't; it's about Max; and you thought I should tell that he put his arm round your waist. But I shan't – no, not never to a single soul, if they put me in the rack! He's a donkey, Max is, and a disagreeable, stupid, cox-comby, stubborn, bubble-headed donkey, that he is! I saw him kiss Miss Twentyman, who used to be our governess, and she slapped his face – and serve him right too, a donkey, to want to kiss anybody – such stupid silly nonsense! It's quite right enough for girls and women to kiss; but for a man – pah! I don't believe Max was ever meant to be anything but a girl, though; and I told him so once, and he boxed my ears, and I threw the butter-plate at him, and the butter stuck in his whiskers, and it was such fun I forgot to cry, though he did hurt me ever so. But I'm not a child, Miss Bedford, and I do love you ever so much, and I'll never say a single word about you and Max; and if he ever bothers you again, you say to him, ‘How's Miss Brown?’ and he'll colour up, and be as cross as can be. I often say it to make him cross. He used to go to see her, and she wouldn't have him because she said he was such a muff, and she married Major Tompkins instead. But it does make him cross – and serve him right too, a nasty donkey! Why, if he'd held my hand like he did yours to-day, I'd have pinched him, and nipped him, and bitten him, that I would! He shan't never send me away any more, though; I shall always stop with you, and take care of you, if you'll love me very much; and I will work so hard – so jolly hard – with my studies, Miss Bedford, I will indeed; for I'm so behindhand, and it was all through Miss Twentyman being such a cross old frump! But you needn't be afraid of me, dear; for I'm not a child, am I?”

As Nelly Bray had talked on, fondling her to whom she clung the while, Ella's sobs had grown less frequent, and at last, as she listened to the gaunt overgrown girl's well-meaning, half-childish,

half-womanly words, she smiled upon her through her tears; for her heart felt lighter, and there was relief, too, in the knowledge that Nelly was indeed enough of a true-hearted woman to read Max Bray's conduct in the right light, and to act accordingly.

"You darling dear sweet love of a governess!" cried Nelly rapturously, as she saw the smile; and clinging to her neck, she showered down more kisses than were, perhaps, quite pleasant to the recipient. "You will trust me, won't you?"

"I will indeed, dear," said Ella softly.

"And you won't fidget?"

"No," said Ella.

"And now – that's right; wipe your eyes and sit down – and now you must talk to me, and take care of me. But you are not cross because I came up without leave?"

"Indeed, no," said Ella sadly. "I thought I was without a friend, and you came just at that time."

"No, no, you mustn't say that," said Nelly, "because I am not old and sensible enough to be your friend. But it hurt me to see you in such trouble, and I was obliged to come; and now you won't be miserable any more; and you mustn't take any notice if Laury is disagreeable – a nasty thing! flirting all day long with my – with Mr Hugh Lingon," she said, colouring. "But there, I'm not ashamed: Hugh Lingon is my lover, and has been ever since he was fourteen and I was six – when he used to give me sweets, and I loved him, and used to say he was so nice and fat to pinch! And Laury was flirting with him all that afternoon at the show, when Max would hang about – a great stupid! – when I wanted to explain things; for you know she was flirting with Hugh because that dear old Charley Vining wouldn't take any notice of her. He is such a dear nice fellow! But I do not love *him*, you know, only like him; and he likes me ever so much. He told me so one day, and gave me half-a-crown to spend in sweets – wasn't it kind of him? He'll often carry a basket of strawberries or grapes over for me and the girls, or fill his pockets with apples and pears for us; when, as for old Max, he'd faint at the very sight of a basket, let alone carry it! You will like Charley. He *is* nice! Laury loves him awful – talks about him in her sleep! But I do not think he cares for her, – and no wonder! But I say, Miss Bedford, how nice and soft your hand is! and, I say, what a little one! Why, mine's twice as big!"

Ella smiled, and went on smoothing the girl's rough hair, but hardly heeding what she said – only catching a word here and there.

"I shouldn't never love Charley Vining," said Nelly, whose grammar was exceedingly loose, "but I should always like him; and if I don't marry Hugh Lingon, I mean to be an old maid, and wear stiff caps and pinders, and then – You're beginning to cry again, and it's too bad, after all this comforting up!"

"No, indeed, my child," said Ella, rousing herself. "I was only thinking that when things are at the blackest some little ray of hope will peep out to light our paths."

"I say," said Nelly, "is that poetry?"

"No," said Ella, smiling sadly.

"Ah, I thought it was," said Nelly. "But then I'm so ignorant and stupid! Mamma says I'm fit for nothing, and I suppose she's right! But there, I'm making you tired with my talking, and I won't say another word; only don't you fidget about Max – only snub him well; and I wouldn't tell pa or ma, because it might make mischief."

Hanging as it were in the balance, Ella allowed the advice of the child-woman at her side to have effect, and determined to say nothing – to make no complaints, trusting to her own firmness to keep her persecutor in his place until his visit was at an end. It was, perhaps, a weak resolve; but who is there that always takes the better of two roads? It was, however, her decision – her choice of way – one which led through a cloud of sorrow, misery, and despair so dense, that in after time poor Ella often asked herself was there to be no turning, no byway that should lend once again, if but for a few hours, into the joyous sunshine of life?

Volume One – Chapter Eleven.

Croquet and Roquet

“Bai Jove, seems a strange thing!” said Max Bray at breakfast-time, about a week after the events recorded in the last chapter – “seems a strange thing you women can’t settle anything without showing your teeth!”

“You women, indeed! Max, how can you talk so vulgarly!” exclaimed Laura.

And then there was silence, for Ella Bedford entered the breakfast-room with her charges.

Strange or not, there had been something more than a few words that morning in the breakfast-room between Mrs Bray and her daughter, concerning a croquet-party to come off that afternoon upon the Elms lawn. As for Mr Bray, he had taken no part in the discussion, “shutting-up” – to use his son’s words – “like an old gingham umbrella, bai Jove!”

However, hostilities ceased upon the appearance of Ella with the children; and Mrs Bray, after shrieking for the tea-caddy, sat down to the urn, and the morning meal commenced.

“Of course, mamma,” said Laura suddenly, “you won’t think of having the children on the lawn?”

“O, I daresay, miss!” cried Nelly, firing up. “Just as if we’re to be set aside when there’s anything going on! Charley Vining says I play croquet just twice as well as you can; and I know he’s coming to-day on purpose to see me!” she added maliciously.

Mr Bray shook his head at her, and Ella slightly raised one finger; but as she made a rule of never correcting her charges when father or mother was present, she did not speak.

“Hold your tongue, you pert child!” exclaimed Laura, with a toss of the head. “You’ll let Miss Bedford keep them in the schoolroom, of course, mamma?”

“Indeed, I don’t see why they should not have a game as well as their sister!” shrieked Mrs Bray, from behind the urn; for after the hostilities of that morning mamma would not budge an inch.

The breakfast ended, Nelly ran round to give Mrs Bray a sounding kiss, and then danced after her sisters and their governess into the schoolroom.

“There, hooray! Beaten her!” shouted Nelly, clapping her hands. “I knew what she meant, Miss Bedford. She didn’t want you to be on the lawn and come and play; and now she’s beaten, and serve her right too! She’s afraid Charley Vining will take more notice of you than he does of her, and I shall tell him.”

“My dear Nelly!” exclaimed Ella, with a look of pain on her countenance; when her wild young charge dropped demurely into a seat, and began to devour French irregular verbs at a tremendous rate, working at them thoroughly hard, and, having a very retentive memory, making some progress.

These were Ella’s happiest moments; for, in spite of their roughness, the three girls in her charge, one and all, evinced a liking for her; and save at times, when she broke out into a thorough childish fit, Nelly grew hourly more and more womanly under her care. But Ella was somewhat troubled respecting the afternoon’s meeting, and would gladly have spent the time in solitude, for it was plain enough that she was to be present solely out of opposition to Laura; and in spite of all her efforts, it seemed that she was to grow daily more distasteful to the dark beauty, who openly showed her dislike before Ella had been in the house a week.

However, the schoolroom studies made very little progress that morning; for before long Mrs Bray entered to give orders respecting dress, sending Nelly into ecstasies as she cast her book aside; and at three o’clock that afternoon, as Laura swept across the lawn to meet some of the coming guests, there was a look of annoyance upon her countenance that was ill-concealed by the smile she wore.

“So absurd!” she had just found time to say to Mrs Bray, “bringing those children and their governess out upon the croquet-ground as if on purpose to annoy people, who are made to give way to humour their schoolroom whims!”

Mrs Bray’s reply was a toss of the head, as she turned off to meet her hopeful son Max, who, after pains that deserved a better recompense, now made his appearance dressed for the occasion.

“Just in time, *bai Jove!*” he drawled; and then he started slightly, for, making a survey of the lawn, he suddenly became aware that Ella Bedford was seated within a few yards with her pupils. “O, here’s Miss Bedford!” he exclaimed; “and, let’s see, there’s Laura; and who are those with her? O, the Ellis people. They don’t play. I want to make up a set at once – want another gentleman. Why, there’s Charley Vining just coming out of the stable-yard; rode over, I suppose. Perhaps he’ll play.”

Ella shrank back, and sent an appealing look towards Mrs Bray; but as Max had said Miss Bedford was to play, there was no appeal.

“Perhaps Miss Nelly here would like to take my place?” said Ella.

“O, dear me, no, Miss Bedford! Mr Maximilian selected you as one of the set, and I should not like him to be disappointed,” said Mamma Bray.

“You’ll play, Vining?” drawled Max.

“Well, no; I don’t care about it,” said Charley good-humouredly. “I’ll make room for some one else.”

“Ya-a-as, but we haven’t enough without you,” said Max. “You might take a mallet, you know, till some one else comes.”

“O, very good,” said Charley, who had just caught sight of Ella with a mallet in her hand. “I’m ready.”

“Then we’ll have a game at once before any one else comes. Now then, Laura, here’s Charley Vining breaking his heart because you don’t come and play on his side. I daresay, though, Miss Bedford and I can get the better of you.”

But Max Bray’s arrangement for a snug *parti* of four was upset by fresh arrivals – Hugh Lingon, looking very stout, pink, and warm, with a couple of sisters, both stouter, pinker, and warmer, and a very slim young curate from a neighbouring village, arriving just at the same time.

Then followed a little manoeuvring and arranging; but in spite of brother and sister playing into each other’s hands, the game commenced with Max Bray upon the same side as Laura, one of the stout Miss Lingons, and the slim curate; while Charley Vining had Ella under his wing.

Croquet is a very nice amusement: not that there is much in the game itself, which is, if anything, rather tame; but it serves as a means for bringing people together – as a vehicle for chatting, flirting, and above all, carrying off the *ennui* so fond of making its way into social fashionable life. You can help the trusting friend so nicely through hoop after hoop, receiving all the while such prettily-spoken thanks and such sweet smiles; there is such a fine opportunity too, whilst assuming the leadership and directing, for enabling the young lady to properly hold her mallet for the next blow – arranging the little fingers, and pressing them inadvertently more tightly to the stick; and we have known very enthusiastic amateurs go so far as to kneel down before a lady, and raise one delicate *bottine*, placing it on the player’s ball, and holding it firmly while the enemy is croque’d. *Apropos* of enemies, too, how they can be punished! How a rival can be ignominiously driven here and there, and into all sorts of uncomfortable places – under bushes and behind trees, wired and pegged, and treated in the most cruel manner!

And so it was at the Elms croquet-party. Looking black almost as night, Laura struck at the balls viciously – a prime new set of Jaques’s best – chipping the edge of her mallet, bruising the balls, and driving Ella Bedford’s “Number 1, blue,” at times right off the croquet-ground. Not that it mattered in the least; for in spite of his self-depreciation, Charley Vining was an admirable player, making long shots, and fetching up Ella’s unfortunate ball, taking it with him through hoop after hoop, till Laura’s eyes flashed, and Max declared, “*bai Jove!*” he never saw anything like it; when

Charley would catch a glimpse of Ella's troubled look, recollect himself, and perform the same acts of kindness for the plump Miss Lingon, to receive in return numberless "O, thank you's!" and "O, how clever's!" and "So much obliged, Mr Vining!" while "that governess," as Laura called her, never once uttered a word of thanks. As for Hugh Lingon, he was always nowhere; and as he missed his aim again and again, he grew more and more divided in his opinions.

First he declared that the ground was not level; but seeing the good strokes made by others, he retracted that observation, and waited awhile.

"I don't think my ball is quite round, Vining," he exclaimed, after another bad stroke.

"Pooh! nonsense!" laughed Charley. "You didn't try; it was because you didn't want to hit Miss Bray."

"No – no! 'Pon my word, no – 'pon my word!" exclaimed Hugh, protesting as he grew more and more pink.

"Did his best, I'd swear – bai Jove, he did!" drawled Max, playing, and sending poor Lingon off the ground.

Then, after a time, Lingon had his turn once more.

"It's not the ball, it's this mallet – it is indeed!" he exclaimed, after an atrocious blow. "Just you look here, Vining: the handle's all on one side."

"Never mind! Try again, my boy," laughed Charley; and soon after he had to bring both his lady partners up again to their hoop, sending Laura's ball away to make room for them, and on the whole treating it rather harshly, Laura's eyes flashing the while with vexation.

"I like croquet for some things," said Laura's partner, the thin curate, after vainly trying to render her a service; "I but it's a very unchristian-like sort of game – one seems to give all one's love to one's friends, and to keep none for one's enemies."

"O, come, I say," laughed Charley, who seemed to be in high spirits. "Here's Mr Louther talking about love to Miss Bray!"

"Indeed, I assure you – " exclaimed the curate.

"But I distinctly heard the word," laughed Charley.

"Was that meant for a witticism?" sneered Laura.

"Wit? no!" said Charley good-humouredly. "I never go in for that sort of thing."

"Bai Jove, Vining! why don't you attend to the ga-a-a-me?" drawled Max, who was suffering from too much of the second Miss Lingon – a young lady who looked upon him as an Adonis.

"Not my turn," said Charley.

"Yes, yes!" said Hugh Lingon innocently. "Miss Bedford wants you to help her along!"

"Of course," sneered Laura. "Such impudence!"

But Charley did not hear her words; for he was already half-way towards poor Ella, who seemed to shrink from him as he approached, and watched with a troubled breast the efforts he made upon her behalf.

"Now it's my turn again," said Hugh. "Now just give me your advice here, Vining. What ought I to do?"

Charley interrupted a remark he was making to Ella Bedford, and pointed out the most advantageous play, when Hugh Lingon raised his mallet, the blow fell, and – he missed.

"Now, did you ever see anything like that?" he exclaimed, appealing to the company.

"Yes, often!" laughed Charley.

"But what can be the reason?" exclaimed Lingon.

"Why, bai Jove! it's because you're such a muff, Lingon, bai Jove!" exclaimed Max.

"I am – I know I am!" said Lingon good-humouredly. "But, you know, I can't help it – can't indeed!"

The game went on with varying interest, Charley in the intervals trying to engage Ella in conversation; but only to find her retiring, almost distant, as from time to time she caught sight of a

pair of fierce eyes bent upon her from beneath Laura's frowning brows. But there was a sweetness of disposition beaming from Ella's troubled countenance, and the tokens of a rare intellect in her few words – spoken to endeavour to direct him to seek for others with more conversational power, but with precisely the contrary effect – that seemed to rouse in Sir Philip Vining's son feelings altogether new. He found himself dwelling upon every word, every sweet and musical tone, drinking in each troubled, trembling look, and listening with ill-concealed eagerness even for the words spoken to others.

“Bai Jove!” exclaimed Max at length, angrily to his sister, “what's the matter with that Charley Vining?”

“Don't ask me!” cried Laura pettishly, as she turned from him to listen to and then to snub the slim curate, who, after ten minutes' consideration, had worked up and delivered a compliment.

Once only did Ella trust herself to look at Charley, taking in, though, with that glance the open-countenanced, happy English face of the young man, but shrinking within herself the next instant as she seemed to feel the bold, open, but still respectfully-admiring glance directed at her.

Two other croquet sets had been made upon the great lawn; and, taking the first opportunity, Ella had given up her mallet into other hands – an act, to Laura's great disgust, imitated by Charley Vining, who, however, found no opportunity for again approaching Ella Bedford until the hour of dinner was announced, when, the major portion of the croquet-players having departed, the remainder – the invited few – met in the drawing-room.

Volume One – Chapter Twelve.

Cross Upon Cross

“Will you take down Miss Bedford, Max?” said Mrs Bray, according to instructions from her son, who, however, was not present, his toilet having detained him; and, therefore, trembling Ella fell to the lot of Charley Vining, whom, she knew not why, she seemed to fear now as much as she did Max Bray.

And yet she could not but own that he was only frank, cordial, and gentlemanly. Only! Was that all? She dared not answer that question. Neither could he answer sundry questions put by his own conscience, as from time to time he encountered angry, reproachful glances from the woman who sat opposite, but to whom, whatever might have been assumed, he had never uttered a word that could be construed into one of love.

Somehow or another, during that dinner, Sir Philip’s words would keep repeating themselves to Charley, and at last he found himself muttering: “Shut myself out from an Eden – from an Eden!” while, when the ladies rose, and the door had closed upon the last rustling silk, a cloud appeared to have come over the scene, and he sat listening impatiently to the drawl of Max, and the agricultural converse of Mr Bray.

It was with alacrity, then, that Charley left the table, when, upon reaching the drawing-room, he found Laura hovering in a paradise of musical R’s, as she sat at the piano, rolling them out in an Italian bravura song, whose pages, for fear that he should be forestalled by Charley Vining, Hugh Lingon rushed to turn over.

“Now Miss Bedford will sing us something,” shrieked Mrs Bray; and not daring to decline, Ella rose and walked to the piano, taking up a song from the canterbury. But her hands trembled as a shadow seemed to be cast upon her; and without daring to look, she knew that Charley Vining was at her side, ready to turn over the leaves.

“If he would only go!” she thought; and then she commenced with tremulous voice a sweet and plaintive ballad, breathing of home and the past, when, living as it were in the sweet strain, her voice increased in volume and pathos, the almost wild expression thrilling through her hearers, till towards the end of the last verse, when forgetting even Vining’s presence in the recollections evoked, Ella was brought back to the present with a start, as one single hot tear-drop fell upon her outstretched hand.

How she finished that song she never knew, nor yet how she concealed her painful agitation; but her next recollection was of being in the conservatory with Charley Vining, alone, and with his deep-toned voice seeming to breathe only for her ear.

“You must think it weak and childish,” he said softly; “but I could not help it,” he added simply. “Perhaps I am, after all, only an overgrown boy; but that was my dear mother’s favourite song – one which I have often listened to; and as you sung to-night, the old past seemed to come back almost painfully. But I need not fear that you will ridicule me.”

“Indeed, no!” said Ella softly. “I can only regret that I gave you pain.”

“Pain! No, it was not pain,” said Charley musingly. “I cannot explain the feeling. I am a great believer in the power of music; and had we been alone, I might have asked you to repeat the strain. I am only too glad, though, that my poor father was not here.”

There was a pause for quite a minute – one which, finding how her companion had been moved, Ella almost feared to break; when seeing him start back, as it were, into the present and its duties, she made a movement as if to return.

“But one minute, Miss Bedford,” said Charley. “You admire flowers, I see. Look at the metallic, silvery appearance of these leaves.”

“Pray excuse me, Mr Vining,” said Ella quietly, “but I wish to return to the drawing-room.”

“Yes – yes – certainly!” exclaimed Charley. “But one moment: I have something to say to you.”

“Mr Vining is mistaken,” said Ella coldly; “he forgets that I am not a visitor or friend of the family. Pray allow me to return!”

“Of course – yes!” said Charley. “But indeed I have something to say, Miss Bedford. Look here!”

He drew the little gold cross from his pocket, and held it up in the soft twilight shed by the coloured lamps, when his companion uttered a cry of joy.

“I have grieved so for its loss!” she exclaimed. “You found it?”

“Yes; beneath that tree where you were taking refuge from the rain. I know it was my duty to have returned it sooner; but I wished to place it in your hands myself.”

“O, thank you – I am so grateful!” exclaimed Ella, hardly noticing the *empressement* with which he spoke.

“I wished, too,” said Charley, speaking softly and deeply, “for some reward for what I have done.”

“Reward?” ejaculated Ella.

“Surely, yes,” said Charley, laying his hand upon the tiny glove resting upon his arm. “You would accord that to the poorest lout who had been the lucky finder.”

“Reward, Mr Vining?” stammered Ella.

“Yes!” exclaimed Charley, his rich deep voice growing softer as he spoke. “And but for those words upon the reverse side, I would have kept the cross as an emblem of my hope. I, too, had a mother who is but a memory now. But you will grant me what I ask?”

“Mr Vining,” said Ella gravely, but unable to conceal her agitation, “will you kindly lead me back to the drawing-room?”

“I thank you for restoring me the cross, which I had never hoped to see again.”

She held out her hand, and the little ornament was immediately placed within her palm.

“You see,” said Charley, “I trust to your honour. I am defenceless now, but you will give me my guerdon?”

“Reward?” said Ella again.

“Yes,” said Charley eagerly; “I do not ask much. That rose that you have worn the evening through: give me that – I ask no more.”

“Mr Vining,” said the agitated girl, “I am poor and friendless, and here as a dependent. I say thus much, since I believe you to be a gentleman. You would not wilfully injure me, I am sure; but this prolonged absence may give umbrage to my employers. Once more, pray lead me back!”

Charley was moved by the appeal, and he turned on the instant.

“But you will give me that simple flower?” he said.

“Mr Vining,” said Ella with dignity, “would you have me lose my self-respect? I thank you for the service – indeed I am most grateful – but I cannot accede to your request.”

“I had hoped that I might be looked on as a friend,” said Charley gloomily, as he once more arrested his companion’s steps; “but there, I suppose if it had been – Pish! forgive me, pray!” he exclaimed. “How weak and contemptible I am! Miss Bedford, I am quite ashamed to have spoken so. But tell me that you forgive me, and – ”

“Is Miss Bedford so mortally offended?” said a voice close at their side. “I have no doubt we can manage to obtain her forgiveness for you, Mr Vining. But not to-night, as there will not be time. – Nelly wants you in the schoolroom, Miss Bedford, and then, as it is late, perhaps you had better not return to the drawing-room this evening.”

Ella Bedford started, as, with flashing, angry eyes, Laura Bray stepped forward from behind the thick foliage of an orange-tree, and then, without a word – for she could not have spoken, so bitter, so cruel were the tones, and so deep the sting – Ella glided from the conservatory, leaving Laura face to face with Charley.

“I am sorry to have interrupted so pleasant a tête-à-tête!” exclaimed Laura tauntingly.

There was no answer. Charley merely leaned against the open window, and gazed out upon the starry night; for he could not trust himself to speak, since every humiliating word addressed to his late companion had seemed to cut into his own heart; and had he spoken, it would have been with some hot angry words, of which he would afterwards have repented.

“Had I known that Mr Charles Vining was so pleasantly engaged, I would not have come,” said Laura again bitterly, and with reproach in every tone of her voice.

Again angry words were on Charley’s lips; but for the sake of her who had left him he crushed them down, as he stood listening to the impatient foot of the angry girl beating the tiled floor, and seemed to feel her eyes burning him as they literally flashed with suppressed rage.

“Perhaps now that Mr Vining is disengaged he will lead me back to the drawing-room, as it might be painful to his feelings for people afterwards to make remarks upon our absence.”

Charley started at this, and made a movement as if to offer his arm; but the remembrance of the cruel insult to the dependent yet rankled in his breast, and he seemed to shrink from the angry woman as from something that he loathed.

Laura saw it, and a sob of rage, disappointment, and passion combined burst from her breast. But even then, if he had made but one sign, she would have softened and thrown herself weeping upon his breast, reproaching, upbraiding, but loving still, and ready to forgive and forget all the past. But Charles Vining was touched to the quick, and, in spite of his calm unmoved aspect, he was hot with passion, wishing in his heart that Max had been the offender, that he might have quenched his rage by shaking him till those white teeth of his chattered again. Then came, though, the thought of Ella Bedford and her position. If he was cold and distant to Laura, would she not visit it upon that defenceless girl? Then he told himself she could behave with no greater cruelty, humiliate her no more, and he felt that he could not play the hypocrite. His growing dislike for Laura Bray was fast becoming a feeling of hatred, and facing her for a moment, he was about to leave the conservatory alone; but no, the gentlemanly courtesy came back – he could not be guilty of rudeness even to the woman he despised; and without a word, he offered his arm, and prepared to lead her back to the drawing-room.

For a moment Laura made as if to take the proffered arm; but at that moment she caught sight of Charley’s frowning, angry face, when, with a cry of passionate grief, she darted past him, and the next instant he saw her cross the hall and hurry upstairs.

“Hyar – hyar, Vining, mai dear fellow, where are you?” cried a drawling voice from the other end of the conservatory.

“Confound it all!” ejaculated Charley, waking as it were into action at the tones of that voice, when with a bound he leaped from the window out on to the lawn, thrust out his Gibus hat, crushed it down again upon his head, and set off with long strides in the direction of the Court.

Volume One – Chapter Thirteen.

The Clearing of a Doubt

“My dear boy, yes – of course I will; and we’ll have a nice affair of it! Edgington’s people shall fit up a tent and a kiosk, and we’ll try and do the thing nicely. You’re giving me great pleasure in this, Charley – you are indeed!”

“Am I, father?” said Charley, whose heart smote him as he spoke, telling himself the while that he was deceiving the generous old man, with whom he had hitherto been open as the day.

“Yes, my dear boy – yes, of course you are! It’s just what I wanted, Charley, to see you a little more inclined for society. You’ll have quite a large party, of course?”

“Well, no, father,” said Charley; “I think not. Your large affairs are never so successful as the small ones.”

“Just so, my dear boy; I think you are right. Well, have it as you please, precisely, only give your orders. Slave of the lamp, you know, Charley – slave of the lamp: what shall I do first?”

“Well, dad,” said Charley, flushing slightly, “I thought, perhaps, you wouldn’t mind doing a little of the inviting for me.”

“Of course not, my dear boy. Whom shall I ask first?”

“Well, suppose you see the Brays,” said Charley, whose face certainly wore a deeper hue than usual.

“To be sure, Charley!” said the old gentleman, smiling.

“They’ve been very kind, and asked me there several times, so you’ll ask them all?”

“Decidedly!” said the old gentleman.

“We must have Max,” said Charley; “for he keeps hanging about here still.”

“O, of course!” said Sir Philip.

“And Laura, I suppose,” said Charley, feeling more and more conscience-stricken.

“By all means, my dear boy!” laughed the father.

“And then there are the three girls, *and the governess*

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