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CHAPTER I

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Stanbury Hill, remote but two hours' walk from a region blasted with mine and factory and furnace, shelters with its western slope a fair green valley, a land of meadows and orchard, untouched by poisonous breath. At its foot lies the village of Wanley. The opposite side of the hollow is clad with native wood, skirting for more than a mile the bank of a shallow stream, a tributary of the Severn. Wanley consists in the main of one long street; the houses are stone-built, with mullioned windows, here and there showing a picturesque gable or a quaint old chimney. The oldest buildings are four cottages which stand at the end of the street; once upon a time they formed the country residence of the abbots of Belwick. The abbey of that name still claims for its ruined self a portion of earth's surface; but, as it had the misfortune to be erected above the thickest coal-seam in England, its walls are blackened with the fume of collieries and shaken by the strain of mighty engines. Climb Stanbury Hill at nightfall, and, looking eastward, you behold far off a dusky ruddiness in the sky, like the last of an angry sunset; with a glass you can catch glimpses of little tongues of flame, leaping and quivering on the horizon. That is Belwick. The good abbots, who were wont to come out in the summer time to Wanley, would be at a loss to recognise their consecrated home in those sooty relics. Belwick, with its hundred and fifty fire-vomiting blast-furnaces, would to their eyes more nearly resemble a certain igneous realm of which they thought much in their sojourn upon earth, and

which, we may assure ourselves, they dream not of in the quietness of their last long sleep.

A large house, which stands aloof from the village and a little above it, is Wanley Manor. The county history tells us that Wanley was given in the fifteenth century to that same religious foundation, and that at the dissolution of monasteries the Manor passed into the hands of Queen Catherine. The house is half-timbered; from the height above it looks old and peaceful amid its immemorial trees. Towards the end of the eighteenth century it became the home of a family named Eldon, the estate including the greater part of the valley below. But an Eldon who came into possession when William IV. was King brought the fortunes of his house to a low ebb, and his son, seeking to improve matters by abandoning his prejudices and entering upon commercial speculation, in the end left a widow and two boys with little more to live upon than the income which arose from Mrs. Eldon’s settlements. The Manor was shortly after this purchased by a Mr. Mutimer, a Belwick ironmaster; but Mrs. Eldon and her boys still inhabited the house, in consequence of certain events which will shortly be narrated. Wanley would have mourned their departure; they were the aristocracy of the neighbourhood, and to have them ousted by a name which no one knew, a name connected only with blast-furnaces, would have made a distinct fall in the tone of Wanley society. Fortunately no changes were made in the structure by its new owner. Not far from it you see the church and the vicarage, these also unmolested in their quiet age. Wanley, it is to be feared, lags far behind the times—painfully so, when one knows for

a certainty that the valley upon which it looks conceals treasures of coal, of ironstone—blackband, to be technical—and of fireclay. Some ten years ago it seemed as if better things were in store; there was a chance that the vale might for ever cast off its foolish greenery, and begin vomiting smoke and flames in humble imitation of its metropolis beyond the hills. There are men in Belwick who have an angry feeling whenever Wanley is mentioned to them.

After the inhabitants of the Manor, the most respected of those who dwelt in Wanley were the Walthams. At the time of which I speak, this family consisted of a middle-aged lady; her son, of one-and-twenty; and her daughter, just eighteen. They had resided here for little more than two years, but a gentility which marked their speech and demeanour, and the fact that they were well acquainted with the Eldons, from the first caused them to be looked up to. It was conjectured, and soon confirmed by Mrs. Waltham’s own admissions, that they had known a larger way of living than that to which they adapted themselves in the little house on the side of Stanbury Hill, whence they looked over the village street. Mr. Waltham had, in fact, been a junior partner in a Belwick firm, which came to grief. He saved enough out of the wreck to: make a modest competency for his family, and would doubtless in time have retrieved his fortune, but death was beforehand with him. His wife, in the second year of her widowhood, came with her daughter Adela to Wanley; her son Alfred had gone to commercial work in Belwick. Mrs. Waltham was a prudent woman, and tenacious of ideas which recommended themselves to her practical instincts; such an idea had much

to do with her settlement in the remote village, which she would not have chosen for her abode out of love of its old-world quietness. But at the Manor was Hubert Eldon. Hubert was four years older than Adela. He had no fortune of his own, but it was tolerably certain that some day he would be enormously rich, and there was small likelihood that he would marry till that expected change in his position came about.

On the afternoon of a certain Good Friday, Mrs. Waltham sat at her open window, enjoying the air and busy with many thoughts, among other things wondering who was likely to drop in for a cup of tea. It was a late Easter, and warm spring weather had already clothed the valley with greenness; to-day the sun was almost hot, and the west wind brought many a sweet odour from gardens near and far. From her sitting-room Mrs. Waltham had the best view to be obtained from any house in Wanley; she looked, as I have said, right over the village street, and on either hand the valley spread before her a charming prospect. Opposite was the wooded slope, freshening now with exquisite shades of new-born leafage; looking north, she saw fruit-gardens, making tender harmonies; southwards spread verdure and tillage. Yet something there was which disturbed the otherwise perfect unity of the scene, an unaccustomed trouble to the eye. In the very midst of the vale, perhaps a quarter of a mile to the south of the village, one saw what looked like the beginning of some engineering enterprise—a great throwing-up of earth, and the commencement of a roadway on which metal rails were laid. What was being done? The work seemed too extensive for a mere scheme of

drainage. Whatever the undertaking might be, it was now at a standstill, seeing that old Mr. Mutimer, the owner of the land, had been in his grave just three days, and no one as yet could say whether his heir would or would not pursue this novel project. Mrs. Waltham herself felt that the view was spoilt, though her appreciation of nature was not of the keenest, and she would never have thought of objecting to a scheme which would produce money at the cost of the merely beautiful.

‘I scarcely think Hubert will continue it,’ she was musing to herself. ‘He has enough without that, and his tastes don’t lie in that direction.’

She had on her lap a local paper, at which she glanced every now and then; but her state of mind was evidently restless. The road on either side of which stood the houses of the village led on to the Manor, and in that direction Mrs. Waltham gazed frequently. The church clock chimed half-past four, and shortly after a rosy-cheeked young girl came at a quick step up the gravelled pathway which made the approach to the Walthams’ cottage. She saw Mrs. Waltham at the window, and, when she was near, spoke.

‘Is Adela at home?’

‘No, Letty; she’s gone for a walk with her brother.’

‘I’m so sorry!’ said the girl, whose voice was as sweet as her face was pretty. ‘We wanted her to come for croquet. Yet I was half afraid to come and ask her whilst Mr. Alfred was at home.’

She laughed, and at the same time blushed a little.

‘Why should you be afraid of Alfred?’ asked Mrs. Waltham graciously.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

She turned it off and spoke quickly of another subject.

‘How did you like Mr. Wyvern this morning?’

It was a new vicar, who had been in Wanley but a couple of days, and had this morning officiated for the first time at the church.

‘What a voice he has!’ was the lady’s reply.

‘Hasn’t he? And such a hairy man! They say he’s very learned; but his sermon was very simple—didn’t you think so?’

‘Yes, I liked it. Only he pronounces certain words strangely.’

‘Oh, has Mr. Eldon come yet?’ was the young lady’s next question.

‘He hadn’t arrived this morning. Isn’t it extraordinary? He must be out of England.’

‘But surely Mrs. Eldon knows his address, and he can’t be so very far away.’

As she spoke she looked down the pathway by which she had come, and of a sudden her face exhibited alarm.

‘Oh, Mrs. Waltham!’ she whispered hurriedly. ‘If Mr. Wyvern isn’t coming to see you! I’m afraid to meet him. Do let me pop in and hide till I can get away without being seen.’

The front door stood ajar, and the girl at once ran into the house. Mrs. Waltham came into the passage laughing.

‘May I go to the top of the stairs?’ asked the other nervously. ‘You know how absurdly shy I am. No, I’ll run out into the garden behind; then I can steal round as soon as he comes in.’

She escaped, and in a minute or two the new vicar presented himself at the door. A little maid might well have some apprehension in facing him, for Mr. Wyvern was of vast proportions and leonine in aspect. With the exception of one ungloved hand and the scant proportions of his face which were not hidden by hair, he was wholly black in hue; an enormous beard, the colour of jet, concealed the linen about his throat, and a veritable mane, dark as night, fell upon his shoulders. His features were not ill-matched with this sable garniture; their expression was a fixed severity; his eye regarded you with stern scrutiny, and passed from the examination to a melancholy reflectiveness. Yet his appearance was suggestive of anything but ill-nature; contradictory though it may seem, the face was a pleasant one, inviting to confidence, to respect; if he could only have smiled, the tender humanity which lurked in the lines of his countenance would have become evident. His age was probably a little short of fifty.

A servant replied to his knock, and, after falling back in a momentary alarm, introduced him to the sitting-room. He took Mrs. Waltham’s hand silently, fixed upon her the full orbs of his dark eyes, and then, whilst still retaining her fingers, looked thoughtfully about the room. It was a pleasant little parlour, with many an evidence of refinement in those who occupied it. Mr. Wyvern showed something like a look of satisfaction. He seated himself, and the chair creaked ominously beneath him. Then he again scrutinised Mrs. Waltham.

She was a lady of fair complexion, with a double chin. Her dress suggested elegant tastes, and her hand was as

smooth and delicate as a lady’s should be. A long gold chain descended from her neck to the watch-pocket at her waist, and her fingers exhibited several rings. She bore the reverend gentleman’s scrutiny with modest grace, almost as if it flattered her. And indeed there was nothing whatever of ill-breeding in Mr. Wyvern’s mode of instituting acquaintance with his parishioner; one felt that he was a man of pronounced originality, and that he might be trusted in his variance from the wonted modes.

The view from the windows gave him a subject for his first remarks. Mrs. Waltham had been in some fear of a question which would go to the roots of her soul’s history; it would have been in keeping with his visage. But, with native acuteness, she soon discovered that Mr. Wyvern’s gaze had very little to do with the immediate subject of his thought, or, what was much the same thing, that he seldom gave the whole of his attention to the matter outwardly calling for it. He was a man of profound mental absences; he could make replies, even put queries, and all the while be brooding intensely upon a wholly different subject. Mrs. Waltham did not altogether relish it; she was in the habit of being heard with deference; but, to be sure, a clergyman only talked of worldly things by way of concession. It certainly seemed so in this clergyman’s case.

‘Your prospect,’ Mr. Wyvern remarked presently, ‘will not be improved by the works below.’

His voice was very deep, and all his words were weighed in the utterance. This deliberation at times led to peculiarities of emphasis in single words. Probably he was a

man of philological crotchets; he said, for instance, ‘pro-spect.’

‘I scarcely think Mr. Eldon will go on with the mining,’ replied Mrs. Waltham.

‘Ah! you think not?’

‘I am quite sure he said that unconsciously,’ the lady remarked to herself. ‘He’s thinking of some quite different affair.’

‘Mr. Eldon,’ the clergyman resumed, fixing upon her an absent eye, ‘is Mr. Mutimer’s son-in-law, I understand?’

‘His brother, Mr. Godfrey Eldon, was.’ Mrs. Waltham corrected.

‘Ah! the one that died?’

He said it questioningly; then added—

‘I have a difficulty in mastering details of this kind. You would do me a great kindness in explaining to me briefly of whom the family at the Manor at present consists?’

Mrs. Waltham was delighted to talk on such a subject.

‘Only of Mrs. Eldon and her son, Mr. Hubert Eldon. The elder son, Godfrey, was lost in a shipwreck, on a voyage to New Zealand.’

‘He was a sailor?’

‘Oh, no!’ said the lady, with a smile. ‘He was in business at Belwick. It was shortly after his marriage with Miss Mutimer that he took the voyage—partly for his health, partly to examine some property his father had had an interest in. Old Mr. Eldon engaged in speculations—I believe it was flax-growing. The results, unfortunately, were anything but satisfactory. It was that which led to his son entering business—quite a new thing in their family. Wasn’t

it very sad? Poor Godfrey and his young wife both drowned! The marriage was, as you may imagine, not altogether a welcome one to Mrs. Eldon; Mr. Mutimer was quite a self-made man, quite. I understand he has relations in London of the very poorest class—labouring people.'

'They probably benefit by his will?'

'I can't say. In any case, to a very small extent. It has for a long time been understood that Hubert Eldon inherits.'

'Singular!' murmured the clergyman, still in the same absent way.

'Is it not? He took so to the young fellows; no doubt he was flattered to be allied to them. And then he was passionately devoted to his daughter; if only for her sake, he would have done his utmost for the family.'

'I understand that Mr. Mutimer purchased the Manor from them?'

'That was before the marriage. Godfrey Eldon sold it; he had his father's taste for speculation, I fancy, and wanted capital. Then Mr. Mutimer begged them to remain in the house. He certainly was a wonderfully kind old—old gentleman; his behaviour to Mrs. Eldon was always the perfection of courtesy. A stranger would find it difficult to understand how she could get on so well with him, but their sorrows brought them together, and Mr. Mutimer's generosity was really noble. If I had not known his origin, I should certainly have taken him for a county gentleman.'

'Yet he proposed to mine in the valley,' observed Mr. Wyvern, half to himself, casting a glance at the window.

Mrs. Waltham did not at first see the connection between this and what she had been saying. Then it occurred to her

that Mr. Wyvern was aristocratic in his views.

‘To be sure,’ she said, ‘one expects to find a little of the original—of the money-making spirit. Of course such a thing would never have suggested itself to the Eldons. And in fact very little of the lands remained to them. Mr. Mutimer bought a great deal from other people.’

As Mr. Wyvern sat brooding, Mrs. Waltham asked—

‘You have seen Mrs. Eldon?’

‘Not yet. She is too unwell to receive visits.’

‘Yes, poor thing, she is a great invalid. I thought, perhaps, you—. But I know she likes to be very quiet. What a strange thing about Mr. Eldon, is it not? You know that he has never come yet; not even to the funeral.’

‘Singular!’

‘An inexplicable thing! There has never been a shadow of disagreement between them.’

‘Mr. Eldon is abroad, I believe?’ said the clergyman musingly.

‘Abroad? Oh dear, no! At least, I—. Is there news of his being abroad?’

Mr. Wyvern merely shook his head.

‘As far as we know,’ Mrs. Waltham continued, rather disturbed by the suggestion, ‘he is at Oxford.’

‘A student?’

‘Yes. He is quite a youth—only two-and-twenty.’

There was a knock at the door, and a maid-servant entered to ask if she should lay the table for tea. Mrs. Waltham assented; then, to her visitor—

‘You will do us the pleasure of drinking a cup of tea, Mr. Wyvern? we make a meal of it, in the country way. My boy

and girl are sure to be in directly.’

‘I should like to make their acquaintance,’ was the grave response.

‘Alfred, my son,’ the lady proceeded, ‘is with us for his Easter holiday. Belwick is so short a distance away, and yet too far to allow of his living here, unfortunately.’

‘His age?’

‘Just one-and-twenty.’

‘The same age as my own boy.’

‘Oh, you have a son?’

‘A youngster, studying music in Germany. I have just been spending a fortnight with him.’

‘How delightful! If only poor Alfred could have pursued some more—more liberal occupation! Unhappily, we had small choice. Friends were good enough to offer him exceptional advantages not long after his father’s death, and I was only too glad to accept the opening. I believe he is a clever boy; only such a dreadful Radical.’ She laughed, with a deprecatory motion of the hands. ‘Poor Adela and he are at daggers drawn; no doubt it is some terrible argument that detains them now on the road. I can’t think how he got his views; certainly his father never inculcated them.’

‘The air, Mrs. Waltham, the air,’ murmured the clergyman.

The lady was not quite sure that she understood the remark, but the necessity of reply was obviated by the entrance of the young man in question. Alfred was somewhat undergrown, but of solid build. He walked in a sturdy and rather aggressive way, and his plump face seemed to indicate an intelligence, bright, indeed, but of the

less refined order. His head was held stiffly, and his whole bearing betrayed a desire to make the most of his defective stature. His shake of the hand was an abrupt downward jerk, like a pull at a bell-rope. In the smile with which he met Mr. Wyvern a supercilious frame of mind was not altogether concealed; he seemed anxious to have it understood that in *him* the clerical attire inspired nothing whatever of superstitious reverence. Reverence, in truth, was not Mr. Waltham's failing.

Mr. Wyvern, as his habit was at introductions, spoke no words, but held the youth's hand for a few moments and looked him in the eyes. Alfred turned his head aside uneasily, and was a trifle ruddy in the cheeks when at length he regained his liberty.

'By-the-by,' he remarked to his mother when he had seated himself, with crossed legs, 'Eldon has turned up at last. He passed us in a cab, or so Adela said. I didn't catch a glimpse of the individual.'

'Really!' exclaimed Mrs. Waltham. 'He was coming from Agworth station?'

'I suppose so. There was a trunk on the four-wheeler. Adela says he looked ill, though I don't see how she discovered so much.'

'I have no doubt she is right. He must have been ill.'

Mr. Wyvern, in contrast with his habit, was paying marked attention; he leaned forward, with a hand on each knee. In the meanwhile the preparations for tea had progressed, and as Mrs. Waltham rose at the sight of the teapot being brought in, her daughter entered the room. Adela was taller by half a head than her brother; she was

slim and graceful. The air had made her face bloom, and the smile which was added as she drew near to the vicar enhanced the charm of a countenance at all times charming. She was not less than ladylike in self-possession, but Mr. Wyvern's towering sableness clearly awed her a little. For an instant her eyes drooped, but at once she raised them and met the severe gaze with unflinching orbs. Releasing her hand, Mr. Wyvern performed a singular little ceremony: he laid his right palm very gently on her nutbrown hair, and his lips moved. At the same time he all but smiled.

Alfred's face was a delightful study the while; it said so clearly, 'Confound the parson's impudence!' Mrs. Waltham, on the other hand, looked pleased as she rustled to her place at the tea-tray.

'So Mr. Eldon has come?' she said, glancing at Adela. 'Alfred says he looks ill.'

'Mother,' interposed the young man, 'pray be accurate. I distinctly stated that I did not even see him, and should not have known that it was he at all. Adela is responsible for that assertion.'

'I just saw his face,' the girl said naturally. 'I thought he looked ill.'

Mr. Wyvern addressed to her a question about her walk, and for a few minutes they conversed together. There was a fresh simplicity in Adela's way of speaking which harmonised well with her appearance and with the scene in which she moved. A gentle English girl, this dainty home, set in so fair and peaceful a corner of the world, was just the abode one would have chosen for her. Her beauty seemed a

part of the burgeoning spring-time, She was not lavish of her smiles; a timid seriousness marked her manner to the clergyman, and she replied to his deliberately-posed questions with a gravity respectful alike of herself and of him.

In front of Mr. Wyvern stood a large cake, of which a portion was already sliced. The vicar, at Adela's invitation, accepted a piece of the cake; having eaten this, he accepted another; then yet another. His absence had come back upon him, and he talked he continued to eat portions of the cake, till but a small fraction of the original structure remained on the dish. Alfred, keenly observant of what was going on, pursed his lips from time to time and looked at his mother with exaggerated gravity, leading her eyes to the vanishing cake. Even Adela could not but remark the reverend gentleman's abnormal appetite, but she steadily discouraged her brother's attempts to draw her into the joke. At length it came to pass that Mr. Wyvern himself, stretching his hand mechanically to the dish, became aware that he had exhibited his appreciation of the sweet food in a degree not altogether sanctioned by usage. He fixed his eyes on the tablecloth, and was silent for a while.

As soon as the vicar had taken his departure Alfred threw himself into a chair, thrust out his legs, and exploded in laughter.

'By Jove!' he shouted. 'If that man doesn't experience symptoms of disorder! Why, I should be prostrate for a week if I consumed a quarter of what he has put out of sight.'

'Alfred, you are shockingly rude,' reproved his mother, though herself laughing. 'Mr. Wyvern is absorbed in

thought.’

‘Well, he has taken the best means, I should say, to remind himself of actualities,’ rejoined the youth. ‘But what a man he is! How did he behave in church this morning?’

‘You should have come to see,’ said Mrs. Waltham, mildly censuring her son’s disregard of the means of grace.

‘I like Mr. Wyvern,’ observed Adela, who was standing at the window looking out upon the dusking valley.

‘Oh, you would like any man in parsonical livery,’ scoffed her brother.

Alfred shortly betook himself to the garden, where, in spite of a decided freshness in the atmosphere, he walked for half-an-hour smoking a pipe. When he entered the house again, he met Adela at the foot of the stairs.

‘Mrs. Mewling has just come in,’ she whispered.

‘All right, I’ll come up with you,’ was the reply. ‘Heaven defend me from her small talk!’

They ascended to a very little room, which made a kind of boudoir for Adela. Alfred struck a match and lit a lamp, disclosing a nest of wonderful purity and neatness. On the table a drawing-board was slanted; it showed a text of Scripture in process of ‘illumination.’

‘Still at that kind of thing!’ exclaimed Alfred. ‘My good child, if you want to paint, why don’t you paint in earnest? Really, Adela, I must enter a protest! Remember that you are eighteen years of age.’

‘I don’t forget it, Alfred.’

‘At eight-and-twenty, at eight-and-thirty, you propose still to be at the same stage of development?’

‘I don’t think we’ll talk of it,’ said the girl quietly. ‘We don’t understand each other.’

‘Of course not, but we might, if only you’d read sensible books that I could give you.’

Adela shook her head. The philosophical youth sank into his favourite attitude—legs extended, hands in pockets, nose in air.

‘So, I suppose,’ he said presently, ‘that fellow really has been ill?’

Adela was sitting in thought; she looked up with a shadow of annoyance on her face.

‘That fellow?’

‘Eldon, you know.’

‘I want to ask you a question,’ said his sister, interlocking her fingers and pressing them against her throat. ‘Why do you always speak in a contemptuous way of Mr. Eldon?’

‘You know I don’t like the individual.’

‘What cause has “the individual” given you?’

‘He’s a snob.’

‘I’m not sure that I know what that means,’ replied Adela, after thinking for a moment with downcast eyes.

‘Because you never read anything. He’s a fellow who raises a great edifice of pretence on rotten foundations.’

‘What can you mean? Mr. Eldon is a gentleman. What pretence is he guilty of?’

‘Gentleman!’ uttered her brother with much scorn. ‘Upon my word, that *is* the vulgarest of denominations! Who doesn’t call himself so nowadays! A man’s a man, I take it, and what need is there to lengthen the name? Thank the

powers, we don’t live in feudal ages. Besides, he doesn’t seem to me to be what you imply.’

Adela had taken a book; in turning over the pages, she said—

‘No doubt you mean, Alfred, that, for some reason, you are determined to view him with prejudice.’

‘The reason is obvious enough. The fellow’s behaviour is detestable; he looks at you from head to foot as if you were applying for a place in his stable. Whenever I want an example of a contemptible aristocrat, there’s Eldon ready-made. Contemptible, because he’s such a sham; as if everybody didn’t know his history and his circumstances!’

‘Everybody doesn’t regard them as you do. There is nothing whatever dishonourable in his position.’

‘Not in sponging on a rich old plebeian, a man he despises, and living in idleness at his expense?’

‘I don’t believe Mr. Eldon does anything of the kind. Since his brother’s death he has had a sufficient income of his own, so mother says.’

‘Sufficient income of his own! Bah! Five or six hundred a year; likely he lives on that! Besides, haven’t they soaped old Mutimer into leaving them all his property? The whole affair is the best illustration one could possibly have of what aristocrats are brought to in a democratic age. First of all, Godfrey Eldon marries Mutimer’s daughter; you are at liberty to believe, if you like, that he would have married her just the same if she hadn’t had a penny. The old fellow is flattered. They see the hold they have, and stick to him like leeches. All for want of money, of course. Our aristocrats begin to see that they can’t get on without money

nowadays; they can’t live on family records, and they find that people won’t toady to them in the old way just on account of their name. Why, it began with Eldon’s father—didn’t he put his pride in his pocket, and try to make cash by speculation? Now I can respect him: he at all events faced the facts of the case honestly. The despicable thing in this Hubert Eldon is that, having got money once more, and in the dirtiest way, he puts on the top-sawyer just as if there was nothing to be ashamed of. If he and his mother were living in a small way on their few hundreds a year, he might haw-haw as much as he liked, and I should only laugh at him; he’d be a fool, but an honest one. But catch them doing that! Family pride’s too insubstantial a thing, you see. Well, as I said, they illustrate the natural course of things, the transition from the old age to the new. If Eldon has sons, they’ll go in for commerce, and make themselves, if they can, millionaires; but by that time they’ll dispense with airs and insolence—see if they don’t.’

Adela kept her eyes on the pages before her, but she was listening intently. A sort of verisimilitude in the picture drawn by her Radical-minded brother could not escape her; her thought was troubled. When she spoke it was without resentment, but gravely.

‘I don’t like this spirit in judging of people. You know quite well, Alfred, how easy it is to see the whole story in quite another way. You begin by a harsh and worldly judgment, and it leads you to misrepresent all that follows. I refuse to believe that Godfrey Eldon married Mrs. Mutimer’s daughter for her money.’

Alfred laughed aloud.

‘Of course you do, sister Adela! Women won’t admit such things; that’s *their* aristocratic feeling!’

‘And that is, too, worthless and a sham? Will that, too, be done away with in the new age?’

‘Oh, depend upon it! When women are educated, they will take the world as it is, and decline to live on illusions.’

‘Then how glad I am to have been left without education!’

In the meantime a conversation of a very lively kind was in progress between Mrs. Waltham and her visitor, Mrs. Mewling. The latter was a lady whose position much resembled Mrs. Waltham’s: she inhabited a small house in the village street, and spent most of her time in going about to hear or to tell some new thing. She came in this evening with a look presageful of news indeed.

‘I’ve been to Belwick to-day,’ she began, sitting very close to Mrs. Waltham, whose lap she kept touching as she spoke with excited fluency. ‘I’ve seen Mrs. Yottle. My dear, what do you think she has told me?’

Mrs. Yottle was the wife of a legal gentleman who had been in Mr. Mutimer’s confidence. Mrs. Waltham at once divined intelligence affecting the Eldons.

‘What?’ she asked eagerly.

‘You’d never dream such a thing! what *will* come to pass! An unthought-of possibility!’ She went on *crescendo*. ‘My dear Mrs. Waltham, Mr. Mutimer has left no will!’

It was as if an electric shock had passed from the tips of her fingers into her hearer’s frame. Mrs. Waltham paled.

‘That cannot be true!’ she whispered, incapable of utterance above breath.

‘Oh, but there’s not a doubt of it!’ Knowing that the news would be particularly unpalatable to Mrs. Waltham, she proceeded to dwell upon it with dancing eyes. ‘Search has been going on since the day of the death: not a corner that hasn’t been rummaged, not a drawer that hasn’t been turned out, not a book in the library that hasn’t been shaken, not a wall that hasn’t been examined for secret doors! Mr. Mutimer has died intestate!’

The other lady was mute.

‘And shall I tell you how it came about? Two days before his death, he had his will from Mr. Yottle, saying he wanted to make change—probably to execute a new will altogether. My dear, he destroyed it, and death surprised him before he could make another.’

‘He wished to make changes?’

‘Ah!’ Mrs. Mewling drew out the exclamation, shaking her raised finger, pursing her lips. ‘And of that, too, I can tell you the reason. Mr. Mutimer was anything but pleased with young Eldon. That young man, let me tell you, has been conducting himself—oh, shockingly! Now you wouldn’t dream of repeating this?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘It seems that news came not so very long ago of a certain actress, singer,—something of the kind, you understand? Friends thought it their duty—rightly, of course,—to inform Mr. Mutimer. I can’t say exactly who did it; but we know that Hubert Eldon is not regarded affectionately by a good many people. My dear, he has been out of England for more than a month, living—oh, such extravagance! And the moral question, too? You know—those women!

Someone, they say, of European reputation; of course no names are breathed. For my part, I can't say I am surprised. Young men, you know; and particularly young men of that kind! Well, it has cost him a pretty penny; he'll remember it as long as he lives.

'Then the property will go—'

'Yes, to the working people in London; the roughest of the rough, they say! What *will* happen? It will be impossible for us to live here if they come and settle at the Manor. The neighbourhood will be intolerable. Think of the rag-tag-and-bobtail they will bring with them!'

'But Hubert!' ejaculated Mrs. Waltham, whom this vision of barbaric onset affected little in the crashing together of a great airy castle.

'Well, my dear, after all he still has more to depend upon than many we could instance. Probably he will take to the law,—that is, if he ever returns to England.'

'He is at the Manor,' said Mrs. Waltham, with none of the pleasure it would ordinarily have given her to be first with an item of news. 'He came this afternoon.'

'He did! Who has seen him?'

'Alfred and Adela passed him on the road. He was in a cab.'

'I feel for his poor mother. What a meeting it will be! But then we must remember that they had no actual claim on the inheritance. Of course it will be a most grievous disappointment, but what is life made of? I'm afraid some people will be anything but grieved. We must confess that Hubert has not been exactly popular; and I rather wonder at it; I'm sure he might have been if he had liked. Just a little

too—too self-conscious, don’t you think? Of course it was quite a mistake, but people had an idea that he presumed on wealth which was not his own. Well, well, we quiet folk look on, don’t we? It’s rather like a play.’

Presently Mrs. Mewling leaned forward yet more confidentially.

‘My dear, you won’t be offended? You don’t mind a question? There wasn’t anything definite?—Adela, I mean.’

‘Nothing, nothing whatever!’ Mrs. Waltham asserted with vigour.

‘Ha!’ Mrs. Mewling sighed deeply. ‘How relieved I am! I did so fear!’

‘Nothing whatever,’ the other lady repeated.

‘Thank goodness! Then there is no need to breathe a word of those shocking matters. But they do get abroad so!’

A reflection Mrs. Mewling was justified in making.

CHAPTER II

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The cab which had passed Adela and her brother at a short distance from Wanley brought faces to the windows or door of almost every house as it rolled through the village street. The direction in which it was going, the trunk on the roof, the certainty that it had come from Agworth station, suggested to everyone that young Eldon sat within. The occupant had, however, put up both windows just before entering the village, and sight of him was not obtained. Wanley had abundant matter for gossip that evening. Hubert's return, giving a keener edge to the mystery of his so long delay, would alone have sufficed to wagging tongues; hut, in addition, Mrs. Mewling was on the warpath, and the intelligence she spread was of a kind to run like wildfire.

The approach to the Manor was a carriage-road, obliquely ascending the bill from a point some quarter of a mile beyond the cottages which once housed Belwick's abbots. Of the house scarcely a glimpse could be caught till you were well within the gates, so thickly was it embosomed in trees. This afternoon it wore a cheerless face; most of the blinds were still down, and the dwelling might have been unoccupied, for any sign of human activity that the eye could catch. There was no porch at the main entrance, and

the heavy nail-studded door greeted a visitor somewhat sombrely. On the front of a gable stood the words ‘Nisi Dominus.’

The vehicle drew up, and there descended a young man of pale countenance, his attire indicating long and hasty travel. He pulled vigorously at the end of a hanging bell-chain, and the door was immediately opened by a man-servant in black. Hubert, for he it was, pointed to his trunk, and, whilst it was being carried into the house, took some loose coin from his pocket. He handed the driver a sovereign.

‘I have no change, sir,’ said the man, after examining the coin. But Hubert had already turned away; he merely waved his hand, and entered the house. For a drive of two miles, the cabman held himself tolerably paid.

The hall was dusky, and seemed in need of fresh air. Hubert threw off his hat, gloves, and overcoat; then for the first time spoke to the servant, who stood in an attitude of expectancy.

‘Mrs. Eldon is at home?’

‘At home, sir, but very unwell. She desires me to say that she fears she may not be able to see you this evening.’

‘Is there a fire anywhere?’

‘Only in the library, sir.’

‘I will dine there. And let a fire be lit in my bedroom.’

‘Yes, sir. Will you dine at once, sir?’

‘In an hour. Something light; I don’t care what it is.’

‘Shall the fire be lit in your bedroom at once, sir?’

‘At once, and a hot bath prepared. Come to the library and tell me when it is ready.’