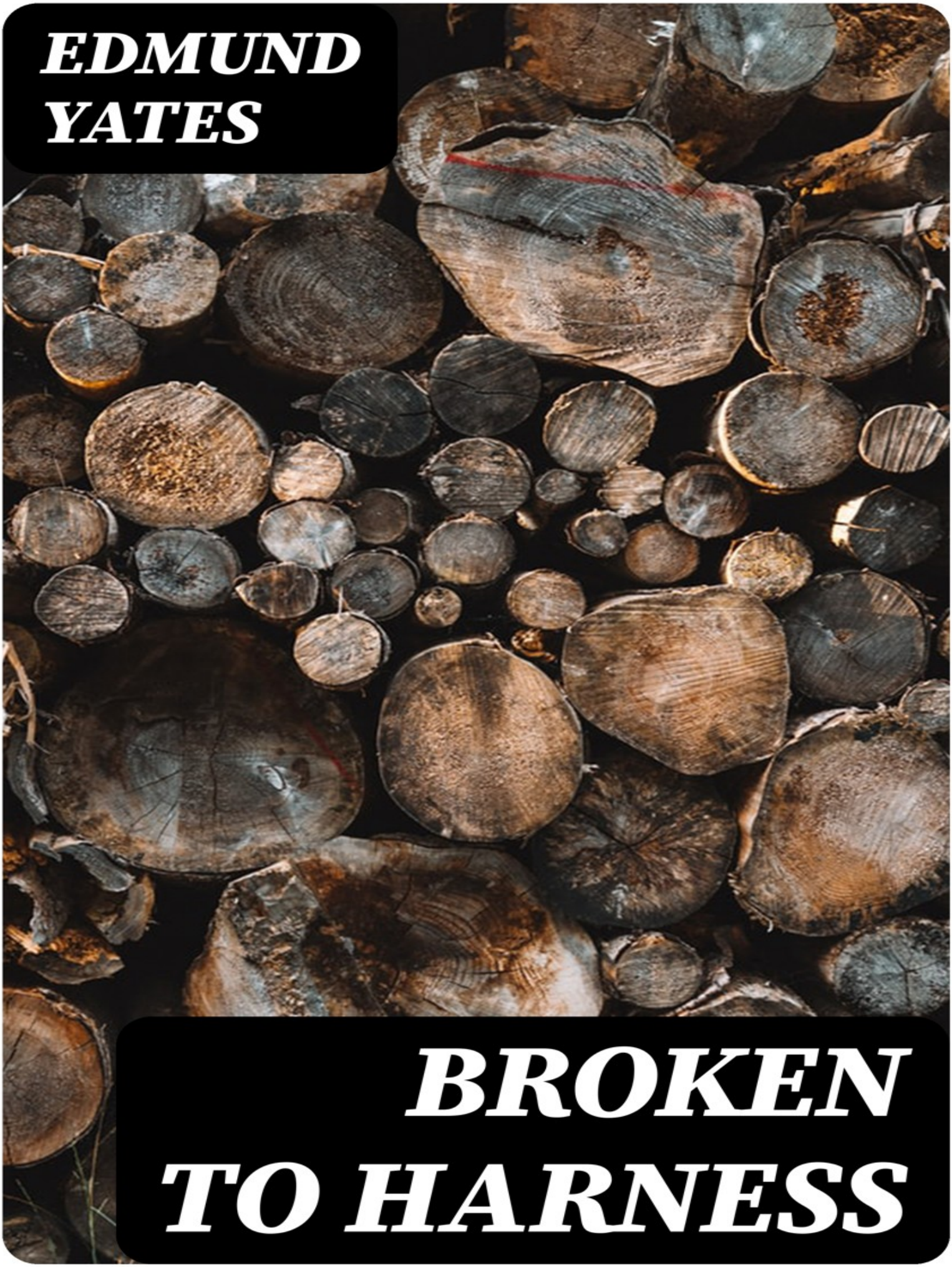
EDMUND YATES



BROKEN TO HARNESS

Edmund Yates

Broken to Harness

A Story of English Domestic Life

EAN 8596547241393

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

MR. CHURCHILL'S IDEAS ARE MONASTIC.

The office of the *Statesman* daily journal was not popular with the neighbours, although its existence unquestionably caused a diminution of rent in its immediate proximity. It was very difficult to find--which was an immense advantage to those connected with it, as no one had any right there but the affiliated; and strangers burning to express their views or to resent imaginary imputations cast upon them had plenty of time to cool down while they wandered about the adjacent lanes in vain quest of their object. If you had business there, and were not thoroughly acquainted with the way, your best plan was to take a sandwich in your pocket, to prepare for an afternoon's campaign, and then to turn to the right out of Fleet Street, down any street leading to the river, and to wander about until you quite unexpectedly came upon your destination. There you found it, a queer, dumpy, black-looking old building,--like a warehouse that had been sat upon and compressed,--nestling down in a quaint little dreary square, surrounded by the halls of Worshipful Companies which had never been heard of save by their own Liverymen, and large churches with an average congregation of nine, standing mildewed and blue-mouldy, with damp voters'-notices peeling off their doors, and green streaks down the stuccoed heads of the angels and cherubim supporting the dripping arch over the

porch, in little dank reeking churchyards, where the rank grass overtopped the broken tombstones, and stuck nodding out through the dilapidated railing.

The windows were filthy with the stains of a thousand showers; the paint had blistered and peeled off the heavy old door, and round the gaping chasm of the letter-box; and in the daytime the place looked woebegone and deserted. Nobody came there till about two in the afternoon, when three or four quiet-looking gentlemen would drop in one by one, and after remaining an hour or two, depart as they had come. But at night the old house woke up with a roar; its windows blazed with light; its old sides echoed to the creaking throes of a huge steam-engine; its querulous bell was perpetually being tugged; boys in paper caps and smeary faces and shirt-sleeves were perpetually issuing from its portals, and returning, now with fluttering slips of paper, now with bibulous refreshment. Messengers from the Electric Telegraph Companies were there about every half-hour; and cabs that had dashed up with a stout gentleman in spectacles dashed away with a slim gentleman in a white hat, returning with a little man in a red beard, and flying off with the stout gentleman again. Blinds were down all round the neighbourhood; porters of the Worshipful Companies, sextons of the congregationless churches, agents for printing-ink and Cumberland black-lead, wood-engravers, box-block sellers, and the proprietors of the Never-say-die or Health-restoring Drops, who held the corner premises,--were all sleeping the sleep of the just, or at least doing the best they could towards it, in spite of the reverberation of the steam-engine at the office of the *Statesman* daily journal.

On a hot night in September Mr. Churchill sat in a large room on the first-floor of the *Statesman* office. On the desk before him stood a huge battered old despatch-box, overflowing with papers--some in manuscript, neatly folded and docketed; others long printed slips, scored and marked all over with ink-corrections. Immediately in front of him hung an almanac and a packet of half-sheets of note-paper, strung together on a large hook. A huge waste-paper basket by his side was filled, while the floor was littered with envelopes of all sizes and colours, fragments cut from newspapers, ink-splashes, and piles of books in paper parcels waiting for review. A solemn old clock, pointing to midnight, ticked gravely on the mantelpiece; a small library of grim old books of reference, in solemn brown bindings, with the flaming cover of the Post-Office Directory like a star in the midst of them, was ranged against the wall; three or four speaking tubes, with ivory mouthpieces, were curling round Mr. Churchill's feet; and Mr. Churchill himself was reading the last number of the *Revue de Deux Mondes* by the light of a shaded lamp, when a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, and a cheery voice said,

"Still at the mill, Churchill? still at the mill?"

"Ah, Harding, my dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you!"

"I should think you were," said Harding, laughing; "for my presence here means a good deal to you,--bed, and rest, and country, eh? Well, how have you been?--not knocked up? You've done capitally, my boy! I've watched you carefully, and am more than content." (For Mr. Harding was the editor of the *Statesman*, and Churchill, one of his

principal contributors, had been taking his place while he made holiday.)

"That's a relief," said Churchill. "I've been rather nervous about it; but I thought that Tooby and I between us had managed to push the ship along somehow. Tooby's a capital fellow!"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Harding, seating himself; "Tooby is a capital fellow, and there's not a better 'sub' in London. But Tooby couldn't have written that article on the Castle-Hedingham dinner, or shown up the *Teaser's* blunders in classical quotation, Master Frank. *Palman qui meruit*. Who did the Bishops and the Crystal Palace?"

"Oh, Slummer wrote those. Weren't they good?"

"Very smart; very smart indeed. A thought too strong of Billingsgate, though. That young man is a very hard hitter, but wants training. Where's Hawker?"

"Just gone. He's been very kind and very useful, so have Williams and Burke, and all. And you--how have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Never so much in my life. I've read nothing but the paper. I've done nothing but lie upon the beach and play with the children."

"And the children--are they all right? and Mrs. Harding?"

"Splendid! I never saw the wife look so well for the last six years. She sent all kind remembrances to you, and the usual inquiry."

"What! if I was going to be married? No, no; you must take back my usual answer. She must find me a wife, and it must be one after her own pattern."

"Seriously, Frank Churchill, it's time you began to look after a wife. In our profession, especially, it's the greatest blessing to have some one to care for and to be petted by in the intervals of business-strife. There used to be a notion that a literary man required to be perpetually 'seeing life,' which meant 'getting drunk, and never going home;' but that's exploded, and I believe that our best character-painters owe half their powers of delineation to their wives' suggestions. Women,--by Jove, sir!--women read character wonderfully."

"Mrs. Harding has made a bad shot at mine, old friend," said Churchill, laughing, "if she thinks that I am in any way desirous to be married. No, no! So far as the seeing life is concerned, I began early, and all that has been over long since. But I've got rather a queer temper of my own. I'm not the most tolerant man in the world; and I've had my own way so long, that any little missy fal-lals and pettishness would jar upon me horribly. Besides, I've not got money enough to marry upon. I like my comforts, and to be able to buy occasional books and pictures, and to keep my horse, and my club, and--"

"Well, but a fellow like you might pick up a woman with money!" said Harding.

"That's the worst pick-up possible,--to have to be civil to your wife's trustees, or listen to reproaches as to how 'poor papa's money' is being spent. No, no, no! So long as my dear old mother lives, I shall have a decent home; and afterwards--well, I shall go into chambers, I suppose, and settle down into a club-haunting old fogey."

"Stuff, Frank; don't talk such rubbish. Affectation of cynicism and affectation of premature age are two of the most pernicious cants of the day. Very likely now at the watering-place to which you're going for your holiday, you'll meet some pretty girl who--"

"Watering-place!" cried Frank, shouting with laughter; "I'm going to my old godfather's country place for some partridge-shooting; and as he's an old bachelor of very peculiar temper, there's not likely to be much womankind about."

"Ho, ho! A country place, eh? and partridge-shooting? Hum, hum! We're coming out. Don't get your head turned with grand people, Frank."

"Grand people!" echoed Churchill. "Don't I tell you the man's my godfather? There will probably be half a dozen men staying in the house, whose sole care about me will be that I carry my gun properly, and don't hit them out in the stubble."

"When do you go?"

"To-morrow, by the midday express. I've some matters to settle in the morning, and can't get down before dinner-time."

"Well, then, get to bed at once. I've got to say a few words to Tooby; and I'll see Marks when he comes up with the statement, and take care that all's straight. You've seen your own proofs? Very well, then; God bless you! and be off, and don't let us see your face for a month."

They shook hands warmly; and as Churchill left the room, Harding called after him, "Two things, Frank: look out for a

nice wife, and don't get your head turned with what are called 'swells.'"

Throughout London town there breathed no simpler-minded man than George Harding. At College, as in after-life, he had lived with a very small set, entirely composed of men of his own degree in the world; and of any other he had the vaguest possible notion. His intellectual acquirements were great, and his reading was vast and catholic; but of men and cities he had seen literally nothing; and as, except in his annual vacation, when he could go down with his family and potter about the quietest of watering-places, he never went any where save from his home to the *Statesman* office, and from the *Statesman* office to his home, he was not likely to enlarge his knowledge of life. Occasionally, on a Saturday night in the season, he would get the Opera-box from the musical critic, and would take Mrs. Harding to Her Majesty's; but there his whole attention would be absorbed in contemplating the appearance and manners of the "swells,"--the one word not to be found in the dictionary which he sometimes indulged in. Slightly Radical in his opinions was George Harding; and that he was not much gratified by his observation of these specimens of the upper ten thousand, was to be traced in certain little pungencies and acerbities in his leading articles after these Opera visits. He worshipped his calling, in his own honest, simple, steadfast way, and resented, quietly but sturdily, any attempts at what he considered patronage by those of higher social rank. The leaders of his political party, recognisant of the good service done to them by Harding's pen, had, on several occasions, essayed to prove their

gratitude by little set civilities: huge cards of invitation to Lady Helmsman's Saturday-evening reunions had found their way to the *Statesman's* deep-mouthed letter-box; carriage-paid hampers of high-flavoured black game sped thither from the Highland shooting-box, where the Foreign Secretary was spending his hard-earned holiday; earliest intimation of political changes, in "confidential" covers, were conveyed there by Downing-Street messengers. But George Harding never appeared at Protocol House; his name was never seen low down amongst those of the Foreign-Office clerks and outer selvage of fashion, chronicled with such urbanity by Mr. Henchman of the *High-Life Gazette*; and no attention or flattery ever made him pander to a shuffle, or register a lie. He had a very high opinion of Churchill's talents and honour; but he knew him to be fond of praise, and, above all, greatly wanting in discretion. Harding had seen so many men full of promise fall into the dreary vortex of drink and debt and pot-house dissipation, that he had hailed with delight the innate decency and gentlemanly feeling which had kept Frank Churchill out of such dirty orgies; but now he feared lest the disinfectant might prove even worse than the disease itself; and lest the aristocratic notions, which his friend undoubtedly possessed, might lead him into society where his manliness and proper pride might be swallowed up in the effulgency of his surroundings.

So mused George Harding, bending over the dingy old grate at the *Statesman* office, and gazing vacantly at the shavings with which it was filled, while waiting for Mr. Marks, the head printer, to bring him the "statement," showing the amount required to fill the paper. Meanwhile Churchill, cigar

in mouth, was striding through the deserted streets, rejoicing in the thought of his coming holiday, and inwardly chuckling over his friend's warnings. At last he stopped at a door in a dull respectable street leading out of Brunswick Square, let himself in with a latch-key, drank a tumbler of soda-water, and glanced at the addresses of some letters in his little dining-room, exchanged his boots for slippers at the bottom of the staircase, and crept slowly up the stairs. As he arrived at the second floor, he paused for a minute, and a voice said, "God bless you, Frank!"

"God bless you, mother!" he replied; "good night, dear;" and passed into his room.

Then he sat himself on the side of his bed, and began leisurely to undress himself, smiling meanwhile.

"Bring back a wife, and beware of swells, eh? That is the essence of Harding's advice. No, no my darling old mother; you and I get on too well together to change our lives. An amusing time a wife would have with me,--out half the night at the office, and she shivering in the dining-room waiting my return. Wife, by Jove! Yes; and thick fat chops, and sixteen-shilling trousers, and the knifeboard of the omnibus instead of the cob to ride on! No; I think not. And as for swells--that old republican, Harding, thinks every man with a handle to his name is an enemy to Magna Charta. I should like to show him my old godfather walking into an idiotic peer of the realm!"

And, very much tickled at the idea, Churchill put out his candle and turned in.

CHAPTER II.

DOWN AT BISSETT.

At the very first sign of the season's breaking up, Sir Marmaduke Wentworth was in the habit of leaving his town-house in Curzon Street, and proceeding to his country-seat of Bissett Grange. Gumble, his butler and body-servant, was the first person officially informed of the intended flight; but long before his master spoke to him, that far-seeing man had made up his mind, and arranged his plans accordingly. "Flitherses gone to-day, eh!" he would say to himself, as, in the calm, cool evening, he lounged against the jams of the street-door (Gumble was never seen in the area) and looked up to the opposite house. "Shutters up, and Flitherses hoff! Some German bath or other, no doubt; elber-shakin' for the old man, and forrin' counts for the young ladies. Lord Charles leff last week; he'll be takin' his rubber at Spaw now as natural as at the Club. The old Berrin has been sent away somewheres; and I'll bet a pound in two days my guv'nor says Hoff!" And he would have won his bet. So soon as there was the slightest appearance of a move among the people of his circle; so soon as he found "shall have left town" given as an answer to an invite to one of his cosey little dinners; before Goodwood afforded the pleasantest excuse for the laziest of racing and the happiest of lunching; while flannel-clad gentlemen yet perspired copiously at Lord's, defending the wickets of Marylebone against the predatory incursions

of "Perambulators" or "Eccentrics;" when Finsburyites were returning from their fortnight at Ramsgate, and while Dalstonians yet lingered on the pier at Southend,--old Marmaduke Wentworth would give his household brigade the order to retreat, and, at their head, would march down upon Bissett Grange.

And he was right; for there was not a nobler old house, nor prettier grounds, in the broad county of Sussex, where it stood. Contrast is the great thing, after all: tall men marry short women; the most thickset nursery-maids struggle a-tiptoe to keep step with the lengthiest members of the Foot-Guards; Plimnims the poet, who is of the Sybarite-roseleaf order, sighs for Miss Crupper the *écuyère*, who calls a horse an oss, and a donkey a hass; and so you, if you had been staying at Brighton, and had gone on an excursion at half-a-crown an hour into the inner country, would have fallen in love with Bissett Grange. For, weary of the perpetual hoarse murmur of the sea, now thundering its rage in tremendous waves, now shrieking its lamentation in long hissing back currents; sick of the monotony of the "long-backed bushless downs," so cold and bare and wind-swept, echoing to the eternal plaint of the curlew, and shutting off the horizon with a dreary never-ending shoulder-blade of blank turf,--you, if you were lucky in your choice, and had a driver with a soul beyond the Steine and aspirations exceeding the Lewes Road, would have come upon, at a distance of some five miles from Brighton, a little one-storied porter's lodge, nestling in ivy so deep that the dear parasite had it in its embrace, chimneys and all. Big, heavy, and wooden were the lodge-gates; none of your pretty, light, elegant

Coalbrookdale innovations. Gates, in Sir Marmaduke Wentworth's idea, were things to keep impertinent prying people out; and as such they could not be made too cumbrous or too opaque for his pleasure. They were very high as well as very heavy; so, if you had come with your 'cute driver in your fly excursion, you would have seen nothing but the quaint twisted chimneys; and even for that view you must have mounted unto the box. Save the friends of the owner, no one, in Marmaduke Wentworth's time, had ever passed the lodge, or rather, I should say, reached the house. Visitors to. Brighton and Worthing, dying of *ennui*, had besieged the lodge' and implored permission to walk in the grounds; artists had asked to be allowed to sketch the house; a "gentleman engaged upon the press" had written to say that he was sure there must be a legend connected with some chamber, if he might only be permitted to explore the mansion; and one man, a photographer, bribed the lodge-keeper's grand-daughter with a piece of elecampane, and, in the absence of the legitimate portress passed the gate. He had proceeded about a couple of hundred yards up the avenue, when he was met by Sir Marmaduke, who had just turned out for his leisurely afternoon ride. The sight of the itinerant professor with his travelling camera roused the old gentleman in an instant; he set spurs to his cob, hurried off to the intruder, and tapped him smartly on the back with his whip. One instant's glance revealed to him the whole affair: it was *not* a travelling Punch, whom he would have sent into the kitchen; it was *not* a man from the Missionary Society, whom he would have had ducked in the pond; it was--*tant soit peu*--an artist;

and for art of any kind, however humble, old Marmaduke had a regard. So when the trembling man looked up, and, divided between a notion of "cheeking the swell," or being impudent, and running away, or being cowardly, hit upon a middle course, and, guarding his head, at which nothing had been aimed, exclaimed, "Now, then! What are you at? Who's hurting you?" all the old gentleman did was to bend from his saddle, to seize the intruder by the lobe of his ear, to turn him completely round, and, pointing to the gate, to utter in a hissing whisper the phrase "Go away, man!"

When the photographer attempted to explain, the ear-pressure was intensified, and the "Go away, man!" uttered more loudly; at the third repetition, the photographer wrung his ear from the old gentleman's fingers, and ran away abjectly.

"Collodion and Clumpsoles; or, the Homes of the British Aristocracy in the Camera: being Reminiscences of a Peripatetic Photographer," therefore, contained no view of Bissett Grange; which was to be regretted, as neither The Hassocks, the Rector's residence, nor The Radishes, the seat of Sir Hipson Hawes, the lord of the manor, both of which figured extensively in the photographic publication, was to be compared with Marmaduke Wentworth's ancestral mansion. The elm-avenue extended from the lodge to the house,--nearly half a mile,--and through the trees you saw the broad expanse of the park, covered with that beautiful soft turf which is in the highest perfection in Sussex, and which afforded pasture for hundreds of dappled deer, who would raise their heads at the sound of approaching footsteps or carriage-wheels, and, after peering forward

earnestly with outstretched necks at the intrusion, would wheel round and start off at a peculiar sling trot, gradually merging into the most graceful of gallops.

Immediately in front of the porch, and only divided from it by the carriage-sweep, was an enormous flower-bed, sloping towards the sides, and culminating in the centre,--the pride of the head-gardener's soul. Right and left of the house were two arches, exactly alike. Passing through that to the left, you came upon the stables and coach-houses, of which there is little to be said, save that they were old-fashioned, and what the helpers called "ill-conwenient;" and that the fine London grooms who came down with their master's hacks and carriage-horses in the autumn--Sir Marmaduke was never at Bissett during the hunting season--used to curse them freely as a set of tumbledown old sheds, fit only for jobs and fly-'osses. And yet the old quadrangle, environed by the stable-buildings, with their red-tiled roofs and their slate-coloured half-hatch doors, each duly bearing its horse-shoe and its hecatomb of mouse and stoat skeletons, was picturesque, more especially of an evening, when the setting sun gleamed on the quaint old clock-turret, ivy-covered and swallow-haunted, and steeped in a rich crimson glow the pretty cottage of old Martin, erst head-groom, now a superannuated pensioner Martin, who was never so happy as when babbling of bygone days, and who "minded the time" when the stables were full of blood horses, and when Master Marmaduke (the present proprietor) rode Saucy Sally over all the raspers in the county.

Through the other arch you came upon the gardens of the Grange. Immediately before you lay a broad expanse of lawn,--such smooth, soft turf as is only met with in England, and only there in well-to-do places. Short, crisp, and velvety was the grass, kept with the greatest care, and rolled and mown with the most undeviating punctuality; for Sir Marmaduke was proud of his lawn, and liked to sit out there in his high-backed rustic seat on the hot August evenings, placidly smoking his cigar, and occasionally raising his head to be fanned by the soft sea-breeze which came blowing over the neighbouring downs. He would as soon have thought of allowing a servant to take a liberty with him as of permitting any one to drive a croquet-iron into that lawn, or to attempt to play any game on it. Between the house and the lawn ran a broad gravelled walk, passing down which you came upon the orchard and upon the fig-garden, which was the glory of the county, and was enclosed with an old red-brick wall, which itself looked ripe and ruddy. To the right lay the kitchen-garden,--a fertile slope of land in the highest state of cultivation, dotted every here and there with huge lights and frames, and spread nets, and overgrown cucumbers, and bursting marrows; for though Sir Marmaduke cared but little for flowers, he was a great fruit-grower, and, next to seeing his pines and melons on his own table (where, glowing on the old ancestral Wentworth plate, they looked like a study for Lance), his great gratification was to bear away with them the prizes from the Horticultural Shows in the neighbourhood. Beyond the orchard was a large field, known as the Paddock, whither thee croquet-players and the archers were relegated, and

where the turf was almost as smooth as that of the sacred lawn itself. Over all,--house, lawn, orchard, kitchen-garden, and paddock, and far away across the surrounding downs--there was a delicious sense of calm and quiet; a feeling which was heightened rather than lessened by the inhabitants of a rookery established in the tall elm-trees bordering the Paddock, and who, as they sailed over the grounds of the Grange, would express their approbation by one single solemn caw.

The house faced the avenue, and was a queer, odd, square block, by no means picturesque, but quaintly ugly something like an old-fashioned child, whose decidedly curious features, out of all drawing and impossible to be admired, yet have something humorously lovable in their expression. A staring red-brick house of Queen Anne's time, that ought to have been formal, and perhaps had been at some period or other, but which had undergone so many changes--had had so many gables put on here, and windows let in there, and rooms added on wherever they were wanted--as to lose all trace of its original design, and to have become of a composite style of architecture which would have driven Mr. Ruskin mad. It was the only gentleman's seat for miles round which was built of red brick, and not that gray stone which always looks weather-beaten and time-worn; instead of which, the Grange had a jolly, cheery, comic expression, and when the sun gleamed on its little diamond-shaped, leaden-casemented windows, they seemed to twinkle like the eyes of a genial red-faced old gentleman at some good joke or pleasant dish. A comfortable old house in every sense of the word, with an

enormous number of rooms, large airy spacious chambers, queer little nooks and snuggeries, long passages with pannelled partitions dividing them from other passages, partitions with occasional square windows or round eyelet-holes cut in them, wide straggling staircases with broad steps and broad balustrades, which no boy had ever yet been known to pass without sliding down them on his stomach. A couple of queer turreted chambers, like the place where the yard-measure lives in old-fashioned work-boxes, and a set of attics, low-roofed, and rather worm-eaten and mouldy-smelling. These were not inhabited, for the servants had their own quarters in the western wing; a bit of eccentric building, which had been thrown out long after the original structure, and gave to the old mansion, from the back view, a comical lopsided appearance; and when the rest of the house was filled, the bachelors were sent to what was known as the Barracks, or the Kennel, a series of jolly little rooms shut out from the respectable portion of the building by a long passage, where they kept up their own fun till a very late hour of the night, where there was always an overhanging smell of tobacco, and whence, in the early mornings, there came such a roaring and clanging of shower-baths, and such a sound of hissing and sluicing and splashing, that you might have fancied yourself in the vicinity of an army of Tritons.

Two o'clock on a hot afternoon at the end of September; and, with the exception of a few sportsmen, who are now reclining under a high hedge and lighting pipes, after a succulent repast of game-pie, cold partridge, and bitter beer, all the party at the Grange is assembled round the

luncheon-table in the dining-room. That is Marmaduke Wentworth, the tall old man standing on the hearthrug, with his back towards the empty fire-grate. His head is perfectly bald and shining, and has but a fringe of crisp white hair; his features are what is called "aristocratic," well-shaped, and comely; his eyes are cold, clear, gray; his lips slightly full, and his teeth sound and regular. He is in his invariable morning dress,--a blue coat with brass buttons, a buff waistcoat, and gray trousers with gaping dog's-eared pockets, into which his hands are always plunged. Looking at him now, you would scarcely recognise the *roué* of George the Fourth's time, the Poins to the wild Prince, the hero of a hundred intrigues and escapades. In heat and turmoil, in drinking, dicing, and dancing, Marmaduke Wentworth passed his early youth; and from this debauchery he was rescued by the single passion of his life. The object of that passion--his cousin, a lovely girl, whose innocence won the dissipated roisterer from his evil ways, and gave him new notions and new hopes--died within three months of their engagement; and from that day Wentworth became another man. He went abroad, and for ten years led a solitary studious life; returning to England, he brought with him his bookworm tastes; and it was long before he emerged from the seclusion of Bissett Grange, which he had inherited, and returned once more to London life. Even then, he sought his society in a very different set to that in which he had previously shone. George the Great was dead; sailor King William had followed him to the grave; and the new men fluttering round the court of the new Queen, setting fashions and issuing social ordinances, had been cradled

children when Marmaduke Wentworth had copied Brummel's cravats, or listened to Alvanley's *bons mots*. Even had he continued a "dandy," he would have been displeased with the "swells" to whom the dandies had given place; and now, changed as he was into a disappointed elderly gentleman, with a bitter tongue and an intolerant spirit, his unsocial cynicism bored the new men, while their slangy flippancy disgusted him. So, in the phrase of the day, he "went in for a new excitement;" and, though his name and his appearance were as well known in London as those of the Duke of Wellington, there were but few people of his own status or time of life who were retained on an intimate footing. Some few old friends, who themselves had suffered heart-shipwreck, or seen their argosies of early feelings go down in sight of port, claimed companionship with the querulous, crotchety companion of their youth, and had their claims allowed. His odd, quaint savagery, his utter contempt for the recognised laws of politeness, his free speaking, and his general eccentricity, had a great charm for young people of both sexes; and if they had any thing in them to elevate them above the ordinary run of yea-and-nay young persons, they invariably found their advances responded to. Then there was a great attraction for young people in the society which they met at one of Marmaduke's dinners--men whose names were before the world; an occasional cabinet-minister sweetening the severities of office with a little pleasant relaxation in company where he might take the mask from his face and the gag from his mouth; authors of note; rising artists; occasionally an actor or two,--all these were to be found round Wentworth's table.

The old gentleman was in London from January to July. During that time he gave four dinner-parties a week (one of them, I regret to say, and generally the pleasantest, on a Sunday), and during the other three days dined out. He was a member of the True-Blue and the Minerva Clubs, but seldom went to either; he was admissible by the hall-porter of every theatre in London, and sometimes strayed behind the scenes and took possession of the green-room hearthrug, whence he vented remarkably free and discriminating criticisms on the actors and actresses surrounding him. He had one special butt, an old German baron of fabulous age, who was supposed to have been a page to Frederick the Great, who had been for thirty years in England, and had only acquired the very smallest knowledge of its language, and whose power of placidly enduring savage attacks was only equalled by the vigour of his appetite. The Baron was never brought down to Bissett; but, as we have heard from Gumble, was sent off to some seaside place to recruit his digestion; whence he invariably turned up again in Curzon Street in January, with the same wig, the same dyed beard, the same broken English, and an appetite, if any thing, improved by his marine sojourn.

There is a strange medley now collected at the Grange. That tall girl, seated at the far end of the table, with her chin leaning on her hand, is Barbara Lexden. Three years ago, when, at nineteen, she was presented, she created a *furore*; and even now, though her first freshness is gone, she is even more beautiful--has rounded and ripened, and holds her own with the best in town. More *distingué*--looking than beautiful, though, is Barbara. Het face is a little too long for

perfect oval; her nose is very slightly aquiline, with delicately curved, thin, transparent nostrils; her forehead marked with two deep lines, from a curious trick of elevating her eyebrows when surprised, and shaded with broad thick masses of dark-brown hair, bound tightly round her head, taken off behind her ears,--small, and glistening like pink shells,--and terminating in a thick plaited clump; sleepy, greenish-gray eyes, with long drooping lashes; a tall, undulating, pear-shaped figure, always seen to best advantage in a tight-fitting dress, with a neat little collar and nun-like simple linen cuffs; a swimming walk; feet and ankles beyond compare; and hands--ah, such hands!--not plump, slender, with long fingers, and rosy filbert nails; such hands as Ninon de l'Enclos might have had, but such as, save on Barbara, I have only seen in wax, on black velvet, under a glass case, modelled from Lady Blessington's, and purchased at the Gore-House Sale. Blue was her favourite colour, violet her favourite perfume, admiration the longing of her soul. She was never happy until every one with whom she was brought into contact had given in their submission to her. No matter of what age or in what condition of life, all must bow. Once, during a Commemoration Week at Oxford, she completely turned various hoary heads of houses, and caused the wife of an eminent Church dignitary, after thirty years of happy marriage, to bedew her pillow with tears of bitter jealousy at seeing how completely the courteous old dean was fascinated by the lovely visitor; and she would laugh with saucy triumph as she heard the blunt, outspoken admiration of working-men as she sat well forward in the carriage blocked up in St. James's Street on a Drawing-room

day, or slowly creeping along the line of vehicles which were "setting down" at the Horticultural-Gardens gates.

With the exception of flirtation, in which she would have taken the highest honours, her accomplishments were neither more nor less than those of most women of her position. She played brilliantly, with a firm, dashing touch, and sang, perhaps not artistically, but with an amount of feeling thrown into her deep contralto that did frightful execution; her French was very good; her German passable, grammatical, and well phrased, but lacking the real rough accent and guttural smack. At all events, she had made the most of what schooling she had had, for it was desultory enough. Her father, the youngest son of a good family, ran away with the black-eyed, ruddy-cheeked daughter of the Herefordshire parson with whom he went to read during the Long Vacation; was immediately disinherited by his father; left the University, and by the influence of his family got into a Government office; where, by his own exertions, he got into bad company, into debt, and into prison. On his deathbed he commended his wife and daughter to the care of his elder sister, who had never married, but lived very comfortably on the property which ought to have been his. Miss Lexden came once to see her brother's widow and orphan in the lodgings which they had taken in Lambeth to be near the King's Bench Prison. But years of trouble had not changed the poor mother for the better, and her stately sister-in-law regarded her with horror. In truth, the colour had faded from her rosy cheeks, and the light died out of her black eyes long ago, and had left her a dowdy, silly, fussy little woman, with nothing to say. So Miss Lexden

thought she could best fulfil her brother's charge with least trouble to herself by allowing the bereaved ones fifty pounds a year; and on this, and what she could make by working for the Berlin-wool and fancy-stationery shops, the widow supported herself and her child for some twelve years, when she died. Miss Lexden then took the child to the dull, stately old house in Gloucester Place, Portman Square; where, with the aid of a toady, the daily visit of a smug physician, an airing in a roomy old carriage drawn by a couple of fat horses, a great deal of good eating and drinking, and a tolerable amount of society, she managed to lead a jolly godless old life. She found her niece, then fourteen years old, less ignorant and more presentable than she had imagined; for Barbara had received from her mother a sound English education, and had, on the pea-and-pigeon principle, picked lip a little French and the rudiments of music. She looked and moved like a lady, and moreover had an insolence of manner, a *de haut en bas* treatment of nearly every body, which the old lady hailed as a true Lexden characteristic, and rejoiced over greatly. So Barbara was sent to Paris for three years, and came back at seventeen finished in education, ripened in beauty, and a thorough coquette at heart. Of course she had already had several *affaires*: several with the professors attached to the Champs-Elysées *pension*; one with an Italian count, who bribed the ladies'-maid to convey notes, and who was subsequently thrashed and instructed in the *savate* by the Auvergnat porter of the establishment; and one with an English gentleman coming over from Boulogne; and her

aunt used to encourage her to tell of these, and would laugh at them until the tears came into her eyes.

At nineteen she was presented, made her *coup*, and now for two seasons had been a reigning belle. Offers she had had in plenty,--youthful peers with slender incomes; middle-aged commoners, solemn, wealthy, and dull; smug widowers, hoping to renew the sweets of matrimony, and trusting to bygone experience to keep clear of its bitters. But Barbara refused them all; played with them, landed them,--giving them all the time the most pleasurable sensations of encouragement, as old Izaak used to tickle trout,--and then flung them back, bruised and gasping, into that muddy stream the world. She told her aunt she was playing for a high stake; that she did not care for any of these men; that she did not think she ever should care for any one; under which circumstances she had better make the best bargain of herself, and go at a high price. There are plenty of women like this. We rave against cruel parents and sordid Mammon-matches; but very often the parents are merely passive in the matter. There are plenty of girls who have walnuts, or peach stones, or something equally impressible, where their hearts should be, who have never experienced the smallest glimmer of love, and who look upon the possession of a carriage and an Opera-box, and admission into high society, as the acme of human enjoyment.

Sitting next to Barbara is Fred Lyster, a slim, dark man, with small regular features and a splendid flowing black beard. He was educated at Addiscombe, and was out in India under Gough and Outram; did good service, was highly

thought of, and was thoroughly happy; when his old godfather died, and left him heir to a property of three thousand a year. He returned at once to England, and became the most idle, purposeless, dreamiest of men. He had tried every thing, and found it all hollow. He had travelled on the Continent, been on the turf, gambled in stocks and railways, kept a yacht, and was bored by each and all. He had thought of going into Parliament, and went for two nights into the Speaker's Gallery; but did not pursue the idea, because he found that "the fellows talked so much." His plaintive moans against life were sources of intense amusement to his friends; and when he discovered this--which he did at once, being a very long way from a fool--he was not in the least annoyed, but rather lent himself to the idea, and heightened his expressions of *ennui* and despondency. He liked to be with Sir Marmaduke; for the old gentleman's brusque manners and general intolerance afforded him real amusement, and he laid himself open to attack by always being more than ever drawling and inane when in his company. The baronet, who had a quick perception of character, knew Lyster's real worth, and often talked to him seriously about having some purpose in life; and when he only got vague and dreamy replies, he would burst out into a torrent of invective, in the middle of which Lyster would run, shrieking with laughter, from the room.

Next to Captain Lyster sits Miss Lexden, Barbara's aunt; a fat, placid-looking old lady, in a flaxen front, which, with a cap covered with ribbons and flowers, seemed skewered on to her skull by a couple of large pins, the knobs of which presented themselves like bosses on her temples. She was a

cousin of Sir Marmaduke's, and the elder sister of the old man's one love, so that there was a great link of confidence between them; and she liked coming to Bissett, where the living was always so good, and where she met people who amused her. That pretty girl talking to her is Miss Townshend,--a delicious creature in a country-house, who can ride across country, and play croquet and billiards, and sing little French *chansons*, and dance, and who even has been known on occasions to drive a dog-cart and smoke a cigarette. To secure her, entails inviting her father, an intensely respectable, dreary old gentleman--that is he, in the starched check cravat and the high coat-collar; a City magnate, who confines his reading to the City article, and has to be promptly extinguished when he attempts to talk about the "policy of Rooshia." He is endeavouring just now to strike up a conversation with his neighbour Mr. Vincent, the member for Wessex, and Chairman of the Dinner-Committee of the House of Commons; but Mr. Vincent is deep in the discussion of a cheese-omelette, and is telegraphing recommendation thereof to Mrs. Vincent, a merry, red-faced looking little woman, who, with her husband, passed her whole life in thinking about good eating. Sir Marmaduke's solicitor, Mr. Russell, a quiet old gentleman, clad in professional black, who was always trying to hide his soft wrinkled hands under his ample coat-cuffs; and Sir Marmaduke's factotum, Major Stone, otherwise Twenty Stone, a big, broad-chested, jovial, bushy-whiskered, moneyless freelance,--completed the party.

CHAPTER III.

STARTING THE GAME.

"Halloa!" suddenly shouted Sir Marmaduke from his vantage-ground on the rug.

Every body looked up.

"Halloo!" shouted the old gentleman again, plunging his hands over the wrists in his trousers-pockets, and bringing to the surface a couple of letters. "By Jove! I forgot to tell Mrs. Mason or any of them that more people were coming down! Here, Stone--somebody--just ring that bell, will you? Here are two men coming down to-day--be here by dinner, they say; and I forgot to order rooms and things for them!"

"Who are they, Sir Marmaduke?" asked Lyster languidly.

"What the deuce is that to you, sir?" roared the old gentleman. "Friends of mine, sir! That's enough, isn't it? Have you finished lunch."

"I haven't had any," said Lyster. "I never eat it. I hate lunch."

"Great mistake that," said Mr. Vincent, wiping his mouth. "Ought always to eat whenever you can. 'Gad, for such an omelette as that I'd get up in the middle of the night."

"Perhaps, Lyster," said Major Stone, coming back from ringing the bell, "you're of the opinion of the man who said that lunch was an insult to your breakfast and an injury to your dinner?"