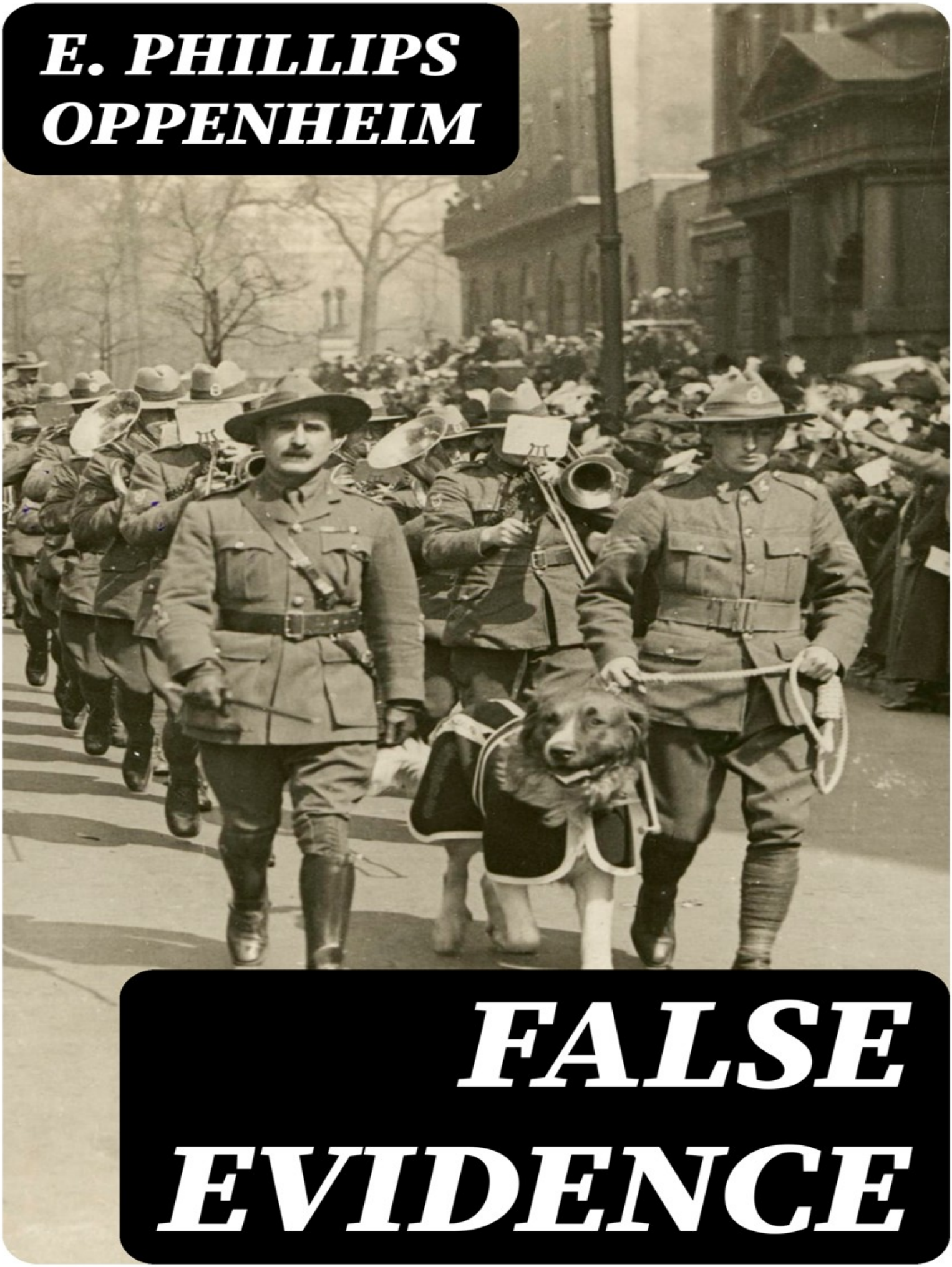
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



FALSE EVIDENCE

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False Evidence

EAN 8596547227151

DigiCat, 2022
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PROLOGUE

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The last sally had been made and repulsed, the last shot fired; the fight was over, and victory remained with the white men. And yet, after all, was it a victory or a massacre? If you were a stay-at-home, and read the report from the telegrams in your club, or in the triumphant columns of the daily papers, especially those on the side of the Ministry, you would certainly have pronounced it the former. But if you had been there on the spot, and had seen the half-naked, ill-armed natives, with the fire of patriotism blazing in their eyes and leaping in their hearts—had seen them being shot down in rows by the merciless guns of the English batteries—another view of the matter might have presented itself to you. It might have occurred to you that these men were fighting on their own soil for their freedom and their country, and that the spirit which was blinding their eyes to the hopelessness of resistance, and urging them on to resist the stranger's progress with such passionate ineffectiveness, was after all, a natural and a poetic one. But, after all, this has nothing to do with my story.

The battle was over, and it was morning. Far away in the east a dull red light had arisen from over the tops of the towering black mountains, and an angry sun was sullenly shining on the scene of carnage. It was a low hillside, once pleasant enough to look upon, but at that moment probably the most hideous sight which the whole universe could

have shown. The silvery streams, which had trickled lazily down to the valley below, now ran thick and red with blood. The luxuriant shrubs and high waving ferns were trampled down and disfigured, and, most horrible sight of all, everywhere were strewn the copper-coloured forms of the beaten natives. There they lay apart and in heaps in all imaginable postures, and with all imaginable expressions on their hard, battered faces. Some lay on their sides with their fingers locked around their spears, and the rigid frown and convulsed passion of an undying hatred branded on their numbed features. Others less brave had been shot in the back whilst flying from the death-dealing fire of the European guns, and lay stretched about in attitudes which in life would have been comical, but in death were grotesquely hideous; and over the sloping fields the misty clouds of smoke still lingered and curled upwards from the battered extinct shells which lay thick on the ground.

High above the scene of devastation, on a rocky tableau at the summit of the range of hills, were pitched the tents of the victors. A little apart from these, conspicuous by the flag which floated above it, were the general's quarters; and underneath that sloping roof of canvas a strange scene was being enacted.

Seated amongst a little group of the superior officers, with a heavy frown on his stern face, sat the general. Before him, at a little distance, with a soldier on either side, stood a tall, slight young man, in the uniform of an officer, but swordless. His smooth face, as yet beardless, was dyed with a deep flush, which might well be there, whether it proceeded from shame or indignation. For he was under arrest, and charged with a crime which, in a soldier, is heinous indeed—it was cowardice.

It was a court-martial before which he stood arraigned, although a hastily improvised one. But soldiers have prompt ideas of justice, and General Luxton was a martinet in all matters of discipline. Disciplinarian though he was, however, he liked little the task which was now before him.

He looked up from the papers, which were stretched out on the rickety little round table, with a sudden movement, and bent his frowning gaze upon the accused. The young man returned his gaze steadily, but the colour in his cheeks grew deeper.

"Herbert Devereux, you stand accused of a crime which, in your profession, nothing can palliate or excuse. Have you anything to say for yourself?"

"There will be no need for me to say anything, sir," was the prompt reply. "It is true that I turned my back upon the enemy, but it was to face a greater danger. The man whose life I saved can disprove this cruel charge against me in a moment. I admit that, from your point of view, appearances are suspicious, but you have only to learn from my half-brother, Rupert Devereux, why I quitted my post, and what I effected by so doing, to absolve me at least from all suspicion of cowardice, however much I may be to blame as a matter of discipline."

General Luxton appeared surprised, a little relieved.

"I hope so," he said, not unkindly. "Roberts, send an orderly to Lieutenant Devereux's tent, and command his presence at once."

The man withdrew, and there was a few minutes' delay. Then the entrance to the tent was lifted up, and a tall, dark young man, with thin but decided features, and flashing black eyes, stepped forward. He was handsome, after a

certain type, but his expression was too lifeless and supercilious to be prepossessing.

General Luxton looked up and nodded.

"Lieutenant Devereux, your half-brother, who stands accused of cowardice in the face of the enemy, appeals to you to give evidence on his behalf. Let us hear what you saw of him during the recent fighting."

Eagerly, and with a confident light in his fair young face, the prisoner turned towards the man to whom these words were addressed. But slowly and deliberately the latter turned his back upon his half-brother without noticing his glance of appeal, and with a scornful light in his eyes. There was a slight murmur, and an interchange of looks amongst the few who were present at this significant action.

"I do not know, General Luxton," he said, slowly, "what the prisoner can expect me to say likely to benefit him. He can scarcely be so mad as to expect me to shield him in this matter on account of our relationship, or to preserve the honour of our name, and yet I do not see why else he should have appealed to me. I saw very little of the affair, and would rather not have seen that. I was riding to you, sir, with a message from Colonel Elliott; and, as I passed trench 4, I saw the prisoner suddenly leave his company and run towards me. He passed several yards to the left, and as he seemed to be hurrying along aimlessly, I called to him. He made no answer, but——"

"LIAR!"

The word seemed hurled out with such a passionate intensity that every one started. General Luxton looked up angrily.

"Silence, sir! You will have an opportunity of saying what you have to say presently. Proceed, Devereux."

"As I was saying," Rupert Devereux continued calmly, without appearing to have noticed the interruption, "he made no answer, but seemed to wish to avoid me. As the message with which I was entrusted was an important one, I rode on and left him hurrying towards the rear."

With a sterner air even than he had at first assumed, General Luxton turned towards the unfortunate young man who stood before him. He was standing as though turned to stone, with wide-open eyes, staring at the man who had just spoken, attitude and expression alike bespeaking an overpowering bewilderment.

"You are at liberty to ask the witness any questions," the General said, shortly.

For a moment there was a dead silence. Then the words came pouring out from his quivering lips like a mountain torrent.

"Rupert, what have you said? What does this mean? Good God, are you trying to ruin me? Did I not run to your assistance because you were beset by those three blackguards? Didn't I kill two of them and save your life? You can't have forgotten it! Why are you lying? Hilton saw it all, and so did Fenwick. Where are they? My God, this is horrible!"

The deep flush had gone from his cheeks, and left him pale as death. Great beads of perspiration stood out upon his forehead, and there was a wild look in his deep blue eyes. But the man to whom he made his passionate appeal kept his back turned and heeded not a word of it. Instead of answering he addressed the General.

"General Luxton," Rupert said, calmly, "the accused, in denying the truth of my statement, mentions the names of two men whom he admits were witnesses of this lamentable occurrence. Might I suggest that they be called to give their version?"

The General nodded assent, and the thing was done. But Hilton was the only one who answered the summons, and on reference to a list of the killed and wounded it was found that Fenwick was reported missing.

"John Hilton, the accused has appealed to you to give evidence on his behalf. Let us hear what you saw of him during the recent fighting."

The man, an ordinary-looking private, stepped forward and saluted.

"I only saw him for a moment, sir," he said, slowly, and with a marked reluctance. "I was riding behind Lieutenant Devereux when I saw him leave his company and pass us a few yards to the left. It struck me that he looked very pale, and I thought that perhaps he was wounded."

"He did not leave his company to come to your master's assistance, then?"

"Certainly not, sir. We were not in any need of it. None of the enemy were near us."

"Thank you. You can go, Hilton."

The man saluted and went.

There was a dead silence for a full minute. Then there came a passionate, hysterical cry from the prisoner—

"*Liar! Liar!* General Luxton, upon my honour, either my brother and this man are under some hallucination or they have entered into a conspiracy against me. Before God Almighty I swear that I only left my post because several of the enemy had crept down from the hill behind and had attacked my brother and his servant. I killed one of them, and the blood of the other is still on my sword. Why, Rupert, you know that you called out, 'Thanks, Herbert, you have saved my life.' Those were your very words!"

The man appealed to shook his head slowly and as though with great reluctance. The sigh seemed to madden the prisoner, and he made a sudden movement forward as though to spring at him.

"Oh, this is horrible!" he cried. "Where is Fenwick? He saw it all. Let him be called."

General Luxton glanced again at the list before him and looked up.

"You are unfortunate in your selections," he said, dryly. "The evidence of Hilton and your brother, to whom you appealed, only strengthens the case against you. Fenwick is missing. Herbert Devereux," he went on sternly, "the charge against you has been proved. I, myself, at a most critical moment, saw you desert your post when it was the centre of attack, and it fell to another's lot to lead your men on to the pursuit. The reasons which you have brought forward to account for your unwarrantable action have been clearly disposed of. You are most certainly guilty of a crime for which, amongst soldiers, there is no pardon. But you are young, and I cannot forget that you are the son of one of the most distinguished officers with whom it has been my good fortune to be associated. For his sake I am willing to make some allowance for you—on one condition

you may retain your commission, and, I trust, retrieve this well-nigh fatal mistake in the future. To the crime of cowardice you have added the crime of lying; for that your account of the attack upon your half-brother and your rescue is a pure fabrication I cannot doubt. The peculiar curve in the defile behind trench 4 unfortunately hid you from the field of battle and prevents further evidence as to the occurrence which, you say, took place. But that your story is false no one can possibly doubt. The place has been carefully examined, and there are no dead bodies within a hundred yards. It seems, from your appeal to your half-brother, that you expected him to shield you at the expense of his honour. This lie and false statement of yours you must retract if you hope for any mercy from me."

There was a convulsive agony in the boy's white, strained face as he drew himself up, and looked half piteously, half indignantly at his judge. But when he tried to speak he could not, and there was a minute or two's dead silence whilst he was struggling to obtain the mastery over himself. All expected a confession, and General Luxton removed his eyes from the prisoner, and bent close over his papers, that none might read the compassion which was in his heart, and which was reflected in his face.

The words came at last; and shrill and incoherent though they were, there was a ring of genuine dignity in them.

"General Luxton, I have been guilty neither of cowardice nor falsehood. I swear before God, on the sword which my father himself put into my hands before I left England; by everything that is most holy to me I swear that my account of this awful occurrence is true. Ask the men of whom I was in command when I caught sight of—of him"—and he pointed with a trembling finger and a gesture than which nothing could have been more dramatic to his half-brother

—"ask them whether I bore myself like a coward when those spears were whistling around us, or when we were fighting hand-to-hand after the first repulse. God knows that I did not. I left my post to encounter a greater danger still. Bitterly do I regret that I ever did so; but it is the only indiscretion of which I am guilty. I swear it."

General Luxton raised his head, and what there had been of compassion in his face was either gone or effectually concealed.

"You have sworn enough already," he said, sternly. "Herbert Devereux, I am bitterly disappointed in you. I was willing to spare your father the disgrace which I fear will kill him; but you cut away the ground from under my feet. You are most certainly proved guilty of gross cowardice in the face of the enemy found guilty, not upon the evidence of one man, but of two, and one of those your own relative. Circumstances, too, are strong against you, so are the probabilities. Most undeniably and conclusively you are found guilty; guilty of cowardice, guilty of falsehood. You will remain under arrest until I can find an opportunity of sending an escort with you to the Hekla. Your commission is forfeited to the Queen, whose uniform you have disgraced."

Never a sign of guilt in the prisoner's countenance. Proudly and indignantly he looked his General straight in the face, his cheeks red with a flush, which was not of shame, and the wild fury in his heart blazing out of his eyes.

"It is not I who have disgraced the Queen's colours; but he—he who has fabricated and sworn to a false string of lies. Rupert, in your heart alone is the knowledge of why

you have done this thing. But some day you shall tell me—or die."

There was something intensely dramatic in the passionate bitterness which vibrated in the shrill boyish tone, and, as though moved by a common impulse, every one in the tent followed that threatening gesture. But the face of Rupert Devereux was little like the face of a guilty man. He looked somewhat agitated, and a good deal pained; but although he was the cynosure of all eyes, he turned never a shade the paler, nor flinched once from the passionate fire which was leaping from the eyes of the young prisoner. He seemed as though about to make some reply; but the General raised his hand.

"Remove the prisoner."

There was a sudden commotion, for, with a deep, despairing groan, and arms for a moment lifted high above his head, he had staggered backwards and sunk heavily to the ground in a dead swoon. What wonder! He was but a boy after all.

* * * * *

"Herbert! Why, Herbert! Good God! where did you spring from? Are you invalided?"

The moonlight was streaming in through the high oriel windows of the long picture-gallery, glittering upon the armour and crossed weapons which hung upon the walls, and casting fantastic rays down the polished oak floor. Colonel Sir Francis Devereux dropped the cigar which he had been peacefully smoking, and brought to a sudden halt his leisurely perambulation of this his favourite resort. Before him, with drooping head, with sunken cheeks, and with deep black rims under his eyes, stood his son Herbert,

who, only a few months ago, had departed on his first campaign, a happy, careless young sub. Was it, indeed, his son, or was it a ghost that had stolen upon him out of the gloomy shadows of the vast gallery?

"Invalided! Would to God that I was dead!" broke from the boy's quivering lips. "Father, I have brought disgrace upon you—disgrace upon our name." And he stretched out his hands towards the long line of pictured warriors, who seemed to be frowning down upon him from the wall. "Disgrace that you will never forgive, never pardon."

Like a statue of stone the proud old soldier stood while he listened to his son's story. Then, with a half-smothered groan, he deliberately turned his back upon him.

"Father," he pleaded, "listen to me. Before heaven I swear that I am innocent. Rupert lied. Why, I don't know, but he lied. I never felt fear."

His father turned half round.

"You have been put on your defence. General Luxton would never have found your father's son guilty of cowardice had there been room for doubt. The charge was proved against you in court-martial."

"But, father, it was because they believed Rupert and his man. The only two other men who saw the struggle are dead."

Colonel Devereux turned away and buried his face in his hands.

"A Devereux guilty of cowardice!" he groaned. "My God! that it should have been my son!"

Then with a sudden movement he turned round. His son had sunk upon his knees before him, and the moon was throwing a ghastly light upon his haggard, supplicating face.

"Out of my sight, and out of my heart for ever, Herbert Devereux!" cried his father, his tones vibrating with a passionate contempt. "You have brought disgrace upon a stainless name. Curse you for it, though you be a thousand times my son. You shall not sleep under this roof again. Begone! Change your name, I command you! Forget that you are a Devereux, as I most surely shall. Turn linen-draper, or man-milliner, or lawyer, what you will so that I never see or hear from you again. Begone, and curse you."

Scathing and vibrating with scorn though the words were, they seemed to touch a chord in the boy's heart, not of humiliation, but of righteous anger. He sprang to his feet, and held himself for a moment as proudly as any of his armoured ancestors who looked down from the walls upon father and son.

"I will go, then," he cried, firmly. "It is right that I should go. But, after all, it is false to say that I have disgraced your name. It is Rupert who has done this."

He turned and walked steadily away, without a backward glance. Out of the swing doors on to the broad staircase, he passed along noble corridors, between rows of marble statues, down into the mighty dome-like hall, and out of the house which he had loved so well. And the servants, who would have pressed forward to welcome him, hung back in fear, for there was that in his face which they shrunk from looking upon. Out into the soft summer night he stepped, heedless of their wondering glances, and down the broad avenue he hurried, never pausing once to breathe in the

balmy night wind, heavy with the odour of sweet-smelling flowers, or to listen to the nightingale singing in the low copse which bordered the gardens. Through a low iron gate he stepped into the park, and walked swiftly along, never glancing to the right or to the left at the strange shadows cast by the mighty oak-trees on the velvety turf, or at the startled deer, who sprung up on every side of him and bounded gracefully away, or at the rabbits who were scampering about all around in desperate alarm; once he had loved to watch and to listen to all these things; but now he felt only a burning desire to escape from them, and to find himself outside the confines of the home which he was leaving for ever. And not until he had reached the last paling, and had vaulted into the broad, white road, did his strength desert him. Then, faint and weary, and heartsick, he sank down in a heap on the roadside, and prayed that he might die.

* * * * *

A cloudless summer morning, with the freshness of dawn still lingering in the air. A morning which seemed about to herald in one of Nature's perfect days, on which to be sad were a crime, and to have troubles absurd. Already the dreamy humming of bees was floating in the atmosphere, and the lark had given place to noisier, if less musical, songsters. It was a glorious morning.

Over the low, iron gate of an old-fashioned garden a girl was leaning, her head resting lightly upon her hand, gazing across the pleasant meadows to the dark woods beyond, with a soft, far-away look in her grey eyes—for she was thinking of her lover. She was dressed in a blue print gown, which hung in simple folds around her straight, slim figure, and she had carelessly passed the long stalk of a full-blown red rose within her waistband. It was a very pleasant view

that she was admiring; but any casual spectator would have declared that she was the most charming object in it.

And there was a spectator, although not a casual one. Suddenly, like a ghost, the figure of her dreams stood before her. Pale, haggard, and dishevelled-looking, he seemed to have risen out of the very ground; and it was very little to be wondered at that, at first, she shrunk back alarmed.

"Herbert! Herbert! can it really be you?"

He never answered her; but, as the first surprise began to fade away, she moved forward, and would have thrown herself into his arms. But he stopped her.

"Keep back, Marian," he cried, hoarsely; "keep away from me! I have come to bid you good-bye."

A swift, sudden fear drove the colour from her cheeks, and chilled her through and through; but she faltered out an answer.

"Good-bye, Herbert! What do you mean? Oh, tell me what has happened, quick!"

"The one thing worse than death, Marian—disgrace!"

And then, with his face turned away, and his eyes resting wearily on the picturesque landscape, he told her his story.

* * * * *

The last word had left his quivering lips, and he stood as though in a dream. The worst was over. He had told his father, and he had told her. It seemed like the end of all things to him.

Suddenly a pair of white arms were thrown around his neck, and a great red rose was crushed to pieces against his waistcoat.

"Herbert! oh, Herbert! how dreadful! Don't look like that, you frighten me!"

He was striving to free himself, but she would not let him go.

"Dearest, you don't understand! This is ruin to me. My father has turned me from the house, commanded me to bear another name, disowned me. Be brave, Marian, for we must part. I am here only to tell you this, and to bid you farewell."

Still she would not let him go.

"You will do nothing of the sort, sir. I'll not be thrown over in that fashion," she said, struggling to smile through her tears. "And, Herbert, oh, Herbert! how ill you look! You've been out all night."

He did not deny it, but again he strove to disengage himself. But she would have none of it.

"Bertie, dearest," she spoke cheerfully, though her eyes were still swimming with tears, "you mustn't think that you're going to get rid of us in this way. You've just got to come in to breakfast with me, and afterwards we'll tell Grannie all about it. Come along, sir, I insist."

He braced himself up for resistance, but he had still to learn that against a woman's love a man's will can prevail nothing. At first he was firm, then wavering, and finally he was led in triumph across the smooth lawn and along the winding path to the French windows of the morning-room.

But when he found himself face to face with the kind old lady who had loved him as her own son, and saw the tears trickle down her withered, apple-red cheeks as she listened to the tale which Marian poured out, he felt that he had passed the limits of self-endurance. For more than twenty-four hours he had neither eaten nor drunk, and he was sick at heart. Gradually Marian felt the arm, which she had drawn tightly through hers, grow heavier and heavier until at last as she finished her tale with a little tremulous burst of indignation, he sank back in the arm-chair, and slowly fainted. But through the mist which closed in upon him he saw nothing but kindly pitying faces bending over his, and heard Grannie's gentle whisper—

"I believe you, Herbert," and more emphatic but none the less earnest were her words, whose sweet, tear-stained face, so close to his, was the last he saw when unconsciousness was closing in upon him.

"So do I, Bertie, I hate Rupert," and sweeter than the most heart-stirring music were the faltering words she added—

"And I love you better than ever. Oh, Grannie, Grannie, he has fainted!"

CHAPTER I
MY APOLOGY

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Fortune is the strangest mistress a man ever wooed. Who courts her she shuns, who deserves her she passes over, and on him who defies her and takes no pains to secure her she lavishes her favours. I am one of those to whom she has shown herself most kind. Many years ago I vowed my life away to one purpose, and that partly an immoral one. It was a purpose which held my life. I swore to seek no end apart from it, and I put away from my thoughts all joys that were not included in its accomplishment. And yet, having kept my oath, I still possess in the prime of life everything which a man could wish for. I am rich, and well thought of amongst my fellows. I am married to the woman whom I love, and life is flowing on with me as calmly and peacefully as the murmuring waters of a woodland stream in the middle of summer. And, above all, my heart is at ease, for I have kept my vow.

She is a strange mistress, indeed! Nothing have I sought or deserved of her, yet everything I have. Whilst he who was far above me in his deservings, and whose sufferings none save myself thoroughly understood, passed through a gloomy life, buffeted by every wind, stranded by every tide of fortune; misunderstood, wronged, falsely accused, and narrowly escaped remaining in men's minds only as a prototype of a passionate, unforgiving, Quixotic man.

That the world may know him as he was, and form a better judgment as to his character, I have gathered together the threads of my life indissolubly connected with his, and have turned them inside out. I have never indulged myself with the feminine luxury of a diary, but with a surer progress than of pen over paper has the record of my strange life been written into my mind; and so I tell it just as it all comes back to me, not as a professed story-teller, with harmonious dates and regular evolution of plot, and neatly paged chapters, but in a bolder way, leaving much to

be guessed at, and some things untold. If there be any of whom I have occasion to speak still amongst the living (my life has so contracted of late that many have passed out of its horizon), let them remember for what purpose I write, and for his sake forbear to complain. If the sword were the pen, then would mine be the pen of a ready writer, and I might be able to touch lightly on their shortcomings, and gild over the black spots on my own life. But enough of excuses. I take up my pen a blunt Englishman, an athlete rather than a scholar, to write a plain story which shall serve not as a eulogy, but as a justification of the man to whom many years of my life have been ungrudgingly given. Let all those who may feel disposed to cavil at the disconnectedness of my loosely jointed story, remember this, and be silent.

CHAPTER II
THE FIRST CLOUD

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About a mile seaward from Porlock, separated from it by a narrow strip of the most luxuriant meadowland in Devonshire, lies the village of Bossington. Perhaps it were better called a hamlet, for at the time when I knew anything about it (which, let the tourist remember, is many years ago) it consisted but of six or seven cottages, a farmhouse, and a half-ruined old manor-house, for the privilege of living in which my father paid ten pounds a year, or some such trifling sum, to the neighbouring clergyman whose property it was.

But what the place lacked in size was certainly atoned for—and more than atoned for—by the beauty of its situation. High above it, like a mighty protecting giant, rose Bossington Headland, covered always with a soft, springy turf, and glowing in midsummer with the brilliant colouring of rich purple heather and yellow gorse. Often have I stood on its highest point, and with my head bared to the strong fresh breeze, watched the sun rise over the Exmoor Hills and Dunkerry Beacon, and waited until it shed its first warm gleams on the white cottages and queer old church-tower of Porlock, which lay clustered together in picturesque irregularity at the head of the little bay. And almost as often have I gazed upon the same scene from the same spot by the less distinct but more harmonious light of the full harvest moon, and have wondered in which guise it seemed the fairest.

Behind Bossington lay Allercombe Woods, great tree-covered hills sloping on one side down to the road which connected, and still connects, Porlock with Minehead and the outside world, and on the other, descending precipitously to the sea; so precipitously indeed that it seemed always a wonder to me how the thickly growing but stunted fir-trees could preserve their shape and regularity. The descent from Bossington Headland into Porlock was by a steep winding path through Allercombe Woods, and many a time I have looked through the thin coating of green leaves upon the fields which stretched like a piece of patchwork below down to the sea, and wondered whether any other country in the world (I had never been out of Devonshire then) could be more beautiful than this.

Within a stone's throw of where the blue sea of our English Bay of Naples rippled in on to the firm white sands, was the tumble-down old building in which we lived. What there had been of walls had long before our time been

hidden by climbing plants and ivy, and in summer-time the place from a distance somewhat resembled a gigantic nosegay of cottage roses, jessamine, and other creeping flowers. There was but a small garden and no ground, for Bossington Headland rose precipitously close to the back of the house, and in front there was no space for any. A shed served as a stable for one or two Exmoor ponies, and also as a sleeping-place for the lanky, raw-boned Devonshire lad whom we kept to look after them.

There were but few habitable rooms in our mansion, but they were sufficient, for our household was a small one. My father, mother, sister, myself, and a country servant comprised it. We never had a visitor, save occasionally the clergyman from Porlock. We never went anywhere. We knew no one, and at seventeen years of age an idea which had been developing in me for a long time, took to itself the tangible shape of words.

"Father," I said to him one evening when we were sitting out upon our little strip of lawn together, he smoking, I envying him for being able to smoke, "do you know that I have never been out of Devonshire—never been further than Exeter even, and I am eighteen years old?"

It was long before he answered me, and when, at last, he turned round and did so, I was distressed to see the look of deep anxiety in his worn, handsome face, and the troubled light in his clear eyes.

"I know it, my boy," he said, pityingly. "I have been expecting this. You are weary of the country."

I stood up, with my hands in my pockets, and my back against the latticed wall of the house, gazing over the sparkling, dancing sea, to where, on the horizon, the stars

seemed to stoop and meet it. Was I tired of this quiet home? I scarcely knew; country sports and country sights were dear to me, and I had no desire to leave them for ever. I thought of the fat trout in the Exford streams, and the huntsman's rallying call from "t'other side Dunkerry," and the wild birds that needed so much getting at and such quick firing, and of the deep-sea fishing, and the shooting up the coombes from Farmer Pulsford's boat, and of the delight of shipping on a hot summer's day and diving deep down into the cool bracing water. Why should I wish to leave all this? What should I be likely to find pleasanter in the world of which, as yet, I knew nothing? For a moment or two I hesitated—but it was only for a moment or two. The restlessness which had been growing up within me for years was built upon a solid foundation, and would not be silenced.

"No, I'm not tired of the country, father," I answered, slowly. "I love it too much ever to be tired of it. But men don't generally live all their lives in one place, do they, without having any work or anything to do except enjoy themselves?"

"And what should you like to be?" my father asked, quickly.

I had long ago made up my mind upon that point, and was not slow to answer—

"I should like to be a soldier," I declared, emphatically.

I was very little prepared for the result of my words. A spasm of what seemed to be the most acute pain passed across my father's face, and he covered it for a moment with his hands. When he withdrew them he looked like a

ghost, deathly pale in the golden moonlight, and when he spoke his voice trembled with emotion.

"God forbid that you should wish it seriously!" he said, "for it is the one thing which you can never be!"

"Oh, Hugh, you do not mean it really; you do not wish to go away from us!"

I turned round, for the voice, a soft and gentle one, was my mother's. She was standing in the open window with a fleecy white shawl around her head, and her eyes, the sweetest I ever saw, fixed appealingly upon me. I glanced from one to the other blankly, for my disappointment was great. Then, like a flash, a sudden conviction laid hold of me. There was some great and mysterious reason why we had lived so long apart from the world.

CHAPTER III
"THE BOY MUST BE TOLD"

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That was quite an eventful night in our quiet life. Whilst we three stood looking at one another half fearfully—I full of this strange, new idea which had just occurred to me—we heard the latch of our garden gate lifted, and Mr. Cox, the vicar of Porlock and my instructor in the classics, followed by no fewer than four large-limbed, broad-shouldered, Porlock men, entered.

They made their way up the steep garden path, and my father, in no little surprise, rose to greet them. With Mr. Cox he shook hands and then glanced inquiringly at his followers, who, after touching their hats respectfully, stood in a row looking supremely uncomfortable, and each betraying a strong disposition to retire a little behind the others. Mr. Cox proceeded to explain matters.

"You are pleased to look upon us as a deputation," he said, pleasantly, waving his hand towards the others, "of which I am the spokesman. We come from the Porlock Working Men's Conservative Club."

My father bowed, and bidding me bring forward a garden seat, requested the deputation to be seated. Then he called into the house for Jane to bring out some jugs of cider and glasses, and a decided smile appeared on the somewhat wooden faces of the deputation. I was vastly interested, and not a little curious.

When the cider had been brought and distributed, and a raid made upon the tobacco jar, Mr. Cox proceeded with his explanation.

"We have come to ask you a favour, Mr. Arbuthnot," he said. "We are going to hold a political meeting in the school-room at Porlock next week. A gentleman from Minehead is going to give us an address on the land question which promises to be very interesting, and Mr. Bowles here has kindly promised to say a few words."

The end man on the seat here twirled his hat, and, being nudged by his neighbour, betrayed his personality by a broad grin. Finally, to relieve his modesty, he buried his face in the mug of cider which stood by his side.