

Face to Face

OR, GERVASE RICKMAN'S
AMBITION.

PART I. CHAPTER I.

Silence and solitude reigned all around; a solitude invaded by the appearance of no living creature save distant flocks of sheep dotted at large over upland pastures or grouped in wattled folds; a silence rather deepened than broken by the peculiar and by no means unmusical sound of the wind sweeping through the short pale-yellow bents which rose sparsely above the fine rich turf of the down. The narrow, white high-road ran straight along the summit of the down; it was unfenced on one side, where the turf sloped so abruptly down to a rich cultivated level so as to make this almost invisible from the road, and on the other bounded by a bank, purple with wild thyme in summer, and crested by a high quickset hedge, which effectually concealed the northern slope of the down and the wooded country beneath it spreading away to the sea. This thorn hedge, which, in default of leaves and blossoms, bore masses of thick and hoary lichen, instead of growing erect from its bank, running nearly east and west, arched over to the north-east with a smooth exactitude of curve, due to the fierce briny sweep of the prevailing winds, and was by the same agency smoothly shorn on the leeward side. These strong salt winds blowing off the sea, and frequently rising to gales, give all the trees and hedges within their influence a marked family likeness, stunting their growth, and forcing them to bow to the north-east as if suddenly made rigid in the height of a south-west gale.

But the salt south-west was silent on this cloudy March afternoon, and in its place a bleak east wind, whirling the white dust from the flinty chalk road, and quieting gradually down as the sun drew nearer the west, was sweeping over the short turf with its low, lonely sound, which is half whistle and half moan. The rich level to the south of the down, sprinkled though it was with occasional farms, each with its cluster of ricks and elm-trees, and varied here and there by a village spire rising from a little circle of thatched roofs, looked very solitary beneath the gray sky. It terminated on the east in some picturesquely broken hills, interrupted by a long, level gray band, which was the sea, and on the south in more hills of moderate height and irregular outline, which derived an unusual grandeur this afternoon from the deep purple shadows resting upon them, and emphasizing their contour against the silvery-gray sky, a sky full of latent light. On the west again there were hills of gentler outline, beyond these little glimpses of plain and woodland, and on the furthest limit a curving break filled with a polished surface of sea, reflecting the dim yellow lustre of the declining sun, which glowed faintly through the curdling clouds above.

The wind went on singing its strange low song to the bleak down-land; the far-off farms and villages gave no sign of life; but one solitary sea-gull sailed slowly on its wide, unceasingly looking wings far below the level of the high-road, yet far above the plain beneath, uttering its complaining cry and receiving the pale reflected sun-rays upon its cream-white plumage, thus making a centre of light upon the purple-gray darkness of the plain and the hills. It passed gradually out of sight, and the silence seemed more death-like than before.

Yet life and music were near, and only awaiting the summons of soft airs and warm sunbeams to spring forth and make the earth glad with beauty and melody. The gnarled, storm-bent thorns were showing tiny leaf-buds on their brown branches where the tangled gray lichens did not usurp their place; cowslips were pushing little satiny spirals through the short turf on the hedge banks; down in the copses, and beneath sheltered hedge-rows, primroses were showing their sweet, pensile faces, and white violets were budding. Many a nest was already built; many a bird already felt the welcome pressure of eggs beneath its warm breast and tasted the fullness of the spring-time; the tall elms on the plain already wore their warm purple robe of blossom; black buds on the gray ash-trees in the copses were swelling to bursting point above the primroses. Yet all seemed lifeless; the red-brown leaves on the oak boughs shivered in the blast; it was scarcely possible to prophesy of the green and golden glory that would clothe them in one brief month. Could those dry bones live?

Presently something black rose silently and swiftly above the green turf border of the chalk road. Beneath it appeared a human face, next a pair of broad shoulders, and finally the whole figure of a man emerged as if from the heart of the earth, and stood fully outlined against the chill sky.

He was young, and strongly rather than gracefully built; the keen wind, from which he did not flinch by so much as an eye-blink, imparted a healthy

pink to his clear complexion. His fair hair was crisped by the wind, and his gray eyes looked all round the wide scene, on which his back had been turned while stepping lightly up the down, in a singular manner. Instead of gazing straightforward like other people's, they looked downward from beneath his eyelids, as if he had difficulty in raising the latter. Having rapidly surveyed earth, sea and sky, he turned and walked westward along the edge of turf by the road, so that his footsteps still made no sound, drew a watch from his pocket, then replaced it beneath his warm pea-jacket, muttering to himself, "Early yet."

Soon he heard a sound as of a multitudinous scraping and panting, above which linked a bell; a cloud of dust rose a foot high from the road, showing as it parted the yellow fleeces and black legs and muzzles of a flock of South-down sheep. He stood aside motionless upon the turf, to let them pass without hindrance; but one of the timid creatures nevertheless took fright at him, and darted down the slope, followed by an unreconciling crowd of imitators. It did not need a low fairy cry from the shepherd, who loomed far behind above the cloud of white dust, himself spectral-looking in his long, grayish-white smock-frock, to send a gallant sheep-dog over the turf, with his fringes floating in the wind, and his tongue hanging from his formidable jaws, while he uttered short angry barks of reproof, and drove the truants into the right path again. But again and yet again some indiscretion on the part of the timid little black faces demanded the energies of their lively and fussy guardian, who darted from one end of the flock to the other with joyful rapidity, hustling his sheep, grumbling at that, barking here, remonstrating there, and driving the bewildered creatures hither and thither with a zeal that was occasionally in excess, and drew forth a brief monosyllable from his master, which caused the dog to fly back and walk sedately behind him with an instant obedience that was as delightful as his intelligent activity.

The actual commander of this host of living things gave little sign of energy, but walked heavily behind his charges with a slow and slouching gait, partially supporting himself on his long crooked stick, and carrying under his left arm a lamb which bleated in the purposeless way characteristic of these creatures. Yet his gaze was everywhere, and he, like his zealous lieutenant, the dog, could distinguish each of these numerous and apparently featureless creatures from the other, and every now and then a slight motion of his crook, or some inarticulate sound, conveyed a whole code of instructions to the eager, watchful dog, who straightway acted upon them. All this the young man motionless on the turf watched with interest, as if a flock of sheep were something uncommon or worthy of contemplation; and when they had all gone by, and the shepherd himself passed in review, his yellow, sun-bleached beard shaken by the keen wind he was facing, he transferred his attention to him.

"Blust'rous," said the shepherd, making his crook approach his battered felt hat, when he came up with him.

"Very blust'rous," responded the gentleman, nodding in a friendly manner and resuming his road.

This was their whole conversation, and yet the shepherd pondered upon it for miles, and recounted it to his wife as one of the day's chief incidents.

"And I zes to 'n, 'Blust'rous—I zes; and he zes to me, 'Terble blust'rous,' he zes. Ay, that's what 'ee zes, zure enough," he repeated with infinitesimal variations, while smoking his after-supper pipe in his chimney-corner.

Thus, you see, human intercourse may be carried on in these parts of the earth with a moderate expenditure of words.

Gervase Rickman went his way pondering upon the shepherd and his flock. How foolishly helpless and helplessly foolish the bleating innocent-faced sheep looked, as they blundered aimlessly out of the road, one blindly following the next in front with such lack of purpose that the wonder was that here and there a solitary sheep should have sufficient intellect to strike on a fresh path and mislead his fellows. And how abject they were to the superior intellect and volition of the dog; how tumultuously they fled before him, thus involving themselves in fresh disorder; how lamely they yielded to his behests, when so small an exercise of will on the part of each might have baffled him, in spite of his terrible fangs; above all, how like, how very like the mass of mankind, "the common herd," as they were so aptly called, they seemed to his musing fancy!

With what a sheep-like fidelity do men follow the few who from time to time blunder upon original paths, how blindly do they pursue them to unknown goals, and how abjectly do multitudes permit themselves to be swayed by the will of one with sufficient daring, energy, and intellect to domi-

nate them! The mass needs a man, a strong personality, a powerful volition to lead it; it bows to the strongest, to a Moses, a Caesar, a Gregory, a Charlemagne, a Cromwell or a Napoleon; democracy is but the shadow of a shade—the aimless revolt of the aimless many against shackles that have been silently forged in the process of the ages—a revolt ending in the incoherence of anarchy, weltering helplessly on till one is born strong enough to lead and create anew; then the centuries solder and cement his work; and give it a fleeting permanence, and thus a civilization is born. Or the centuries refuse their sanction, and the work slowly resolves itself again to chaos. So Gervase Rickman mused.

But he was not of the herd; he would follow none. He felt within himself an intensity of purpose and a passion of concentration, together with a strength of intellect that must lift him above his fellows. So he thought and mused, not knowing what was within him, and into what channels the current of his character would set; for he was young.

He went on his way, still keeping to the turf, and thus still silently, for it was his habit to move with as little sound as possible, until the ground rose into so steep a mound that he was compelled to take the road. He was now approaching the end of the down-road, at the extremity of which, where the thorn hedge ended, there stood a little lonely hosiery in an empty courtyard, fenced by a low stone wall. On one side of the small inn was a tree, bending as usual to the north-east, and imparting that air of perfect loneliness which the presence of a single tree invariably gives to an isolated building. The inn proclaimed itself the Traveller's Rest by a sign over its low porch and closed door. There were no flowers in the little court, though it faced the south; neither tree nor vegetable grew in the barren enclosure, which was tenanted solely by a large deer-hound stretched in a watchful attitude before the porch.

Mr. Rickman did not look at the inn, though a side glance of his eyes took in the dog with a sparkle of satisfaction; while the dog on hearing his footsteps, which were also faintly audible to two women in an upper room, slightly pricked his ears and looked at him with an indifferent air, dropping his muzzle comfortably on to his forepaws again when he had passed.

Another road crossed the level down-road at right angles just beyond the solitary inn. Opposite the inn-front on the turf was a stagnant pond, the milky water of which was crisped to ripples by the keen wind, and in the angle formed by two roads stood a wooden sign-post.

When he reached the sign-post, Gervase Rickman leaned against it with his back toward the inn, which was now some distance from him, and gazed over the broad expanse of level champagne to the dark hills, on the broken slopes of which the shadows were shifting. He did not appear to mind the wind, which caught him full in the side of the face, ruffled his hair, and obliged him to press his low felt hat more firmly over his brows; the sound it made among the withered stalks above the sward pleased him, and he mused and mused in the stillness, an image of peaceful contemplation, with his refined features and look of quiet concentrated power.

While he was thus musing, his quick ear caught the sound of footsteps in the distance behind him; but he did not turn his head, for the footsteps were those of a stranger and could not interest him, so he thought. They were the firm, elastic steps of a man in the flower of life, they smote the hard road with an even joyous rhythm, and were accompanied by the clear, cheery tones of a singing voice:

"As we lay, all the day,
In the Bay of Biscay, O!"

Both song and footsteps penetrated to a quiet upper chamber in the inn, where two women sat together, one wasted with mortal sickness and wearing the unnatural rose of fever in her face, the other radiant with youth and health. The latter paused in her reading and looked up as the strain of manly song broke upon the quiet of the sick-room, the invalid's face brightened, and she said it was a pleasant song.

"It is a good voice," said the reader, "and the voice of a gentleman."

The singer went joyously on his way, and paused in his song when he saw the motionless figure at the foot of the sign-post. Gervase Rickman still gazed dreamily away over the valley to the dark hills. A man has but to purpose a thing strongly to gain his purpose, he was thinking; fate is but the shadow of an old savage dream; a man's life is in his own hands. In fancy he saw the flock of sheep driven on and on along the dusky highway by the shepherd, whose figure suggested all sorts of images to his mind, save the august image of the Shepherd of mankind.

"To Medington four and a half miles," was written on one of the arms of the sign-post above his head, and the pedestrian reading this, paused a moment and looked at the silent figure beneath, which with averted gaze appeared unconscious of his approach. He was not skilled in reading character, or he would have observed the look of strength and steadfast purpose on the quiet face before him.

"Is this the only road to Medington," he asked.

"No; there are four," replied Rickman, facing about, but not meeting the level gaze of the stranger, as he replied to his salutation.

"Which takes me past Arden Manor?" asked the stranger, who looked as if he would enjoy a friendly chat.

"Neither."

"Surely that is Arden Manor I saw

lying beneath the down by the church as I came along?"

"Yes."

"An old gentleman named Rickman lives there, I think; a queer old dry-as-dust of a fellow, who collects antiquities."

"A Mr. Rickman, F.R.S., lives there," replied Gervase, with a dry smile; "he also collects beetles. You are perhaps a brother naturalist or antiquary?"

"I know a beetle from a butterfly and that's about all," he said. "No; I was to go over the downs from Oakwell and meet a friend by Arden Manor on the road to Medington. I have evidently gone wrong."

"No; you are quite right. If you keep straight on you will come to Arden Cross at the foot of the hill. For Arden Manor you turn to the left, but that takes you away from Medington. Turn up the lane to the right, and you go direct over the downs to Medington, or straight on by the high-road you get to Medington."

"Paul meant Arden Cross," reflected the stranger aloud. "Thank you. I remember the down path now, that is the short cut. Can you help me to a light? This wind is too much for matches."

Gervase opened his jacket, and in the shelter thus made the stranger, stooping, for he was tall, struck a match and lighted a short pipe, thus giving the other the opportunity of a close and unobserved scrutiny of his face in the glow of the match. It was a dark, healthy, well-favored face, on the whole the kind of face that goes to the heart of every woman, old or young.

"A good-looking fool," thought Gervase, consigning him mentally to the herd of mankind. "Edward Annesley, no doubt; an officer, by his mustache and swagger."

He was wrong about the swagger; though the stranger walked like a soldier. Having lighted his pipe, the officer, thanking him for his courtesy, went on his way down the hill, and was lost to sight before the sound of his footsteps ceased to ring upon the hard road, Rickman looking after him with a superior sort of smile, until the sound of other steps approaching from behind stirred every fibre within him and lighted a flame in his veiled gray eyes. On came the steps, swift, light, and even, very different from the soldier's firm strides, though telling like them of youth, health, and a light heart; yet Gervase, for all the stir of feeling they evoked within him, appeared to take no notice of them, but continued his rapt contemplation of the shadowed hillslopes, brightened now by long mottled shafts of light from the sinking sun, around which the clouds were breaking away in beautiful glory as the keen wind stilled itself more and more in shifting to a warmer quarter.

A voice soon accompanied the light footsteps, echoing in a woman's round, clear notes, the soldier's song:

"There we lay, all the day,
In the Bay of Biscay, O!"

At this point Mr. Rickman left the post against which he had so long been leaning, and strolled quietly on without turning his head, while the singer, who made rapid progress, repeated her snatch of song, and the hound, which had been lying before the inn door, flew before and around her in widening sweeps, all the grace and strength of its lithe, slender body showing to the utmost advantage, until it included Gervase in its gyrations, whereupon he turned and waited, while a tall young woman came up with him.

"I thought you would never see me, Gervase," she said. "What deadly schemes were you meditating under the sign-post?"

"I was watching the weather," he replied; "the wind is chopping round; we shall have a change. Where have you been?"

"With Ellen Gale; I am glad for her sake the wind is changing, the east wind is so bad for her."

She came between Gervase and the setting sun, which grew more radiant each moment, and now sent forth a dazzling mesh of golden rays to tangle themselves in the short growth of curling hairs roughed by the wind from her rich plaits beneath, thus forming a saint-like halo around the face of Alice Lingard, a face distinguished by that indefinable charm, which is the very essence of beauty, and yet is often wanting in the most perfect features. It was a charm which went to the very heart of the young man walking by her side, and yet which he could not describe; he knew only that it was lacking to every other face he had ever seen; he knew also that it was not given to every one to discover that hidden grace. For each face has its own charm, the magic of which has different power over different people, and enchants many or few, according to its own intrinsic potency.

The two walked on together at Alice's brisker pace, talking with the unconstrained familiarity of friends; Alice involved in the glory of the warm sun-rays, while a deeper rose bloomed in her face as the fresh air touched it, and her blood warmed with the exercise; Gervase, for the most part, listening and monosyllabic.

They passed a large deserted chalk quarry, its steep cliff-sides looking ghost-like, save where a stray sunbeam shot its long gold lustre upon them, and then they came round the shoulder of the down and saw, nestling beneath it, a church with a low, square, grey tower and a gabled stone house sheltered from the south-west by a row of weather-beaten Scotch firs; lower down along the valley ran a straggling village, all thatch and greenery. Then they left the chalk, and dipped into a deep sandy lane with steep banks and overhanging hedges, and here in sheltered nooks primroses were looking shyly forth, and violets were pushing tiny buds to the light.

"Not a violet is out yet," said Alice.

This was the moment of Gervase's triumph. He took from a deep pocket a something carefully folded in a leaf, and, uncovering it, presented to his companion, with a quiet smile, a little posy of white violets, pink tipped, and set in a gleaming circle of leaves.

She took it with an exclamation of pleasure, and lifted it to her fresh face to inhale its delicate fragrance. "To think that you should find the first!" she said, half jealously.

He was in the seventh heaven, but said nothing. He had secretly watched the budding of those violets for a week, and walked far and quickly to gather them for her that afternoon, and now he had his reward in seeing her carress the flowers and talk of them for a good five minutes, till the sound of hoofs along the lane behind them made her look up.

CHAPTER II. Fire-Light.

The rapid beat of hoofs and the roll of wheels drew nearer and nearer, and a dog-cart drawn by a servicable cob flashed down the hill toward the pedestrians with many a scattered pebble and spark of fire, for the dusk was now falling.

On reaching them, the driver pulled the cob sharply up on his haunches, gave the reins to the groom, sprung to the ground, all in a flash of time, and was shaking hands with Gervase and Alice, and walking by their side almost before they had time to recognize him. Alice gave him a frank smile of welcome, and Gervase smiled too, but he murmured something inaudible to himself that was not flattering to the new-comer.

The latter was a young man, with a dark, strong, intelligent face which had just missed being handsome. He walked well, dressed well, and had about him a certain air which would have challenged attention anywhere. He did not look like a parish doctor.

"And how are they all at Arden?" he asked, in a full, cordial voice. "Where did you get those violets? It is enough to make a man sad. See here, I thought these were the first." And he drew a second little bunch of white violets from his breast-pocket and gave them to Alice, who received them with another frank smile.

"How kind of you to think of me!" she said. "Gervase found these, but he was only five minutes ahead of you."

Gervase smiled inwardly; the new-comer's face darkened, and he silently returned the rude observation the former had made upon him a moment before, and then comforted himself by the reflection: "Gervase is nobody."

"So you have been visiting my patients again, Miss Lingard," he said aloud; "you must not go about making people well in this reckless way. How are we poor doctors to live?"

"Did you find Ellen any better?" she asked.

"She was wonderfully perked up, as the cottagers say; I knew you had been there, without any telling. We must try to get her through the spring winds. I say, Rickman, you haven't seen such a thing as a stray cousin anywhere about, have you?"

"I did catch sight of such an article half an hour since," he replied. "He asked me the way to Medington by Arden Manor, where one Paul, it appeared, had agreed to meet him."

"A tall, good-looking fellow with a pleasant face—"

"And a beautiful voice," interrupted Alice. "It must be the gentleman I heard singing past the Traveller's Rest, Gervase. I was just going to ask if you had seen him."

"He sings like a nightingale. Yes; that was no doubt Ted. Oh! you will all like him. I shall bring him over to the Manor, if I can. I don't say if I may," he added, with a smile.

"Because you know we are always pleased to see your friends," returned Gervase. "But your cousin is an old friend of ours, Annesley, and evidently remembered us. He asked if a queer old fellow named Rickman lived in Arden Manor down there."

"The rascal! Did you tell him he was speaking to the queer old fellow's son?"

"Not I. I wanted to hear what he should say about us."

"What a shame!" said Alice; "those are the bad, underhand ways Sybil and I are always trying to overcome in you. Well, Doctor Annesley, here is Arden Cross, but no cousin apparently."

"He would be well over St. Michael's Down by this time," added Gervase. "But who is this, coming down the lane?"

Two figures emerged from the deeply shadowed lane which led from the down to the paler dusk of the cross-roads, and discovered themselves to be an elderly laboring-man and a youth, both clad in fustian, who touched their hats and then stopped.

"Evening, miss; evening, sir. Ben up hoam, dacter? Poor Eln was terble bad 's marning," said the elder, who was no other than the host of the Traveller's Rest, Jacob Gale.

"Ellen was better," replied the doctor, cheerfully.

"Oh! yes; she was really quite bright when I saw her, Gale," added Alice, in a still more encouraging voice.

The man shook his head. "She won't never be better," he growled, "though she med perk up a bil too many good you, miss. I've a zin too many good that way to be took in, bless your heart. How long do ye give her, dacter? I baint in no hurry vur she too good, as I knows on," he added, with a view to contradict erroneous impressions.

The doctor replied that it was impossible to say; she might linger for months, or she might go that night.

(To be continued.)