The Pagan's Cup

By Fergus Hume

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The Pagan's Cup

BY

Fergus Hume

AUTHOR OF

"THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB," "THE RAINBOW FEATHER," "CLAUDE DUVAL OF NINETY-FIVE," ETC.

NEW YORK
G. W. DILLINGHAM COMPANY
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THE PAGAN'S CUP

CHAPTER I

A MODERN ARCADIA

CERTAIN portions of England yet remain undiscovered by Americans and uncivilised by railways. Colester village above King's-meadows, in a county which need not be named, is one of these unknown spots. No doubt before long the bicycle and the motor-car will enliven its somnolent neighbourhood, but at present it is free from the summer jaunts of tourists. With this neglect the Colester folk profess themselves satisfied. They have no wish to come into contact with the busy world. This prejudice against intrusion dates from mediæval times, when strangers rarely came to the village with peaceful intentions. Even now a chance comer is looked upon with suspicion.

Mr Richard Pratt said something of this sort to the vicar during a morning ramble, some six weeks after he had taken up his residence in The Nun's House. With the parson and the gentry of the parish Mr Pratt agreed very well, his respectability having been vouched for by Mrs Gabriel, the lady of the manor. But the villagers still held aloof, although the new-

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comer did his best to overcome their churlish doubts. They did not credit his story that he had settled in Colester to pass his remaining years in peace, and even the money he scattered so freely could not buy their loyalty. Pratt had never met with such people before. In most countries an open purse invites an open heart; but the Colester villagers were above Mammon worship. Such an experience was refreshing to Pratt, and introduced him to a new type of humanity.

"The first place I ever struck in which the dollar is not all-powerful," he said, with his Yankee twang and pleasant laugh.

"We are not sufficiently educated in that respect," replied Mr Tempest in his simple way. "For my part, I am not ill pleased that my parishioners should refuse to worship the Golden Calf."

"There is no calf about me, I guess," said Pratt, grimly, "and very little gold. I don't say I haven't a decent income, but as to being a millionaire—no, sir."

"In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed is king, Mr Pratt. You are a millionaire in this poor place. But I fear you find it dull."

"Why, no, vicar. I'm glad to be out of the buzz. The world's made up of nerves and machinery nowadays. At fifty-two years of age I can't stand the racket. This Sleepy Hollow's good enough for me to stay in until I peg out. Guess I'll buy an allotment in that graveyard of yours."

"Hollow!" said the vicar, smiling, "and our earthly dwelling-place is set upon a hill! Mr Pratt, I suspect you have Irish blood in your veins."

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Pratt laughed, and being to a large extent devoid of humour, explained earnestly that he had used the word figuratively. "Washington Irving, Rip Van Winkle," he explained, nodding, whereat the vicar smiled again.

The situation of Colester was striking and strange. A green-clothed promontory extended abruptly from the high table-land into King's-meadow. To right and left chalky cliffs of considerable height flared away for miles, forming a buttress to the moors above and walls to the plains below. In pre-historic ages the ocean waves had beaten against these cliffs, but, gradually receding, had left dry the miles upon miles of fertile lands now called King's-meadows. An appanage of the Crown, they had been called so from the days of William the Conqueror.

From where they stood, the vicar and his friend had a bird's-eye view of this desirable land, unrolled like a map under the bright June sky. League after league of corn-fields stretched away to the clear, shining line of ocean; and amidst the ripening grain appeared red-roofed villages, clumps of trees, the straight lines of dusty white roads and the winding, glittering serpent of the river. And as a background to this smiling plenty—if so Irish an expression be permitted—was the blue expanse of the Channel dotted with the white sails of merchantmen.

A small wood of ancient oaks shut off the purple-clad moor from the spur upon which Colester was built. On the verge of this, yet encircled by trees, stood the village church—a crusading chapel, dedi-

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cated to St Gabriel the Messenger. Thence the ground fell away gradually, and spread out into a broad neck of land, down the centre of which ran a road leading from chapel to village. On either side of this, amidst oaks and elms and sycamores, were the houses of the gentry. From where they ended the promontory rose into two rounded hills, with a slight depression between. On the one to the left the village was built, its houses cramped within a tumble-down wall, dating from the days when it was needed as a defence. The other hill was surmounted by a well-preserved castle, the keep of which with its flag could be seen above the oak woods. This was inhabited by Mrs Gabriel, the sole representative of the feudal lords of Colester. Yet she was only the childless widow of the last baron, and had none of the fierce Gabriel blood in her viens. The once powerful and prolific family was extinct.

From castle and village steps led down into the depression between the two hills. Down this continued the chapel road, sloping gradually with many windings to the plains below. The whole place had the look of some Rhenish robber-hold. And if tradition was to be trusted, the Gabriel lords had dwelt like eagles in their eyrie, swooping down at intervals to harry and plunder, burn and slay the peaceful folk of the plains. A turbulent and aggressive race the Gabriels. It had defied king and priest, and parliament and people. Time alone had ever conquered it.

"A survival of the Middle Ages," said Mr Tempest, pointing out these things to his companion. "It

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was needful that the Gabriel barons should build strong defences. They were fierce and blood-thirsty, defiant of law and order. For many centuries they were a scourge to the inhabitants of the plains. These often complained to the king, and several times the place was besieged, but without result. The Gabriels kept their hold of it. The only thing they ever lost was their title. A bill of attainder was passed against them in the time of the second George. After that they became less lions than foxes."

"Just so," said Mr Pratt. "This place couldn't do much against artillery, I guess. And even in the bow and arrow days, a strong force coming over the moor and down the spur—"

"That was often tried," interrupted Tempest, quickly, "but the attempt always failed. In the days of Henry II. Aylmer Gabriel beat back an overwhelming force, and then erected the chapel as a thanksgiving. The Archangel Gabriel was the patron saint of the family, and the chapel is dedicated to him."

"He couldn't keep the family from dying out, however," said Pratt, as they moved towards the village.

"No. With the late John Gabriel the family became extinct. But I daresay Mrs Gabriel will arange that her adopted son succeeds. He can take the name and the coat of arms. I should be very pleased to see that," added the vicar, half to himself. "Leo is a good fellow, and would make an excellent landlord."

The eyes of the American flashed when the name was mentioned, but he made only a careless comment.

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"Leo Haverleigh," he said, after a pause, "he's a right smart young chap, sure. Who is he?"

"The son of Mrs Gabriel's brother. She was a Miss Haverleigh, you know. I believe her brother was somewhat dissipated, and died abroad. The boy arrived here when he was three years of age, and Mrs Gabriel adopted him. He will be her heir."

"Is there anyone to object?" asked Pratt, eagerly.

The vicar shook his head. "The Gabriels are absolutely extinct. Failing Leo, the estates would lapse to the Crown. In the old days they would have been seized by the king in any case, as the sovereigns were always anxious to hold this point of vantage which dominated their lands below. But we live in such law-abiding times, that Mrs Gabriel, although not of the blood of the family, can leave the estates to whomsoever she will. I understand that she has quite decided Leo shall inherit and take the name; also the coat of arms."

"She doesn't strike me as over-fond of the boy," said Pratt, as they climbed the crooked street; "rather a hard woman I should say."

"Mrs Gabriel has a particularly high moral standard," replied the vicar, evasively, "and she wishes all to attain to it. Leo—" he hesitated.

"He's no worse than a boy ought to be," said the American, cheerily. "Your young saint makes an old sinner. That's so, vicar!"

Mr Tempest laughed outright. "I fear there is small chance of Leo becoming a saint either young or

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old," he said, "though he is a good lad in many ways. Wild, I admit, but his heart is in the right place."

Pratt smiled to himself. He knew that Leo was in love with Sybil, the daughter of this prosy old archæologist. Simple as Mr Tempest was, he could not be blind to the possibility of his daughter making such an excellent match. "Oh, yes," laughed Pratt, knowingly, "I'm sure his heart is in the right place."

But by this time the vicar was on his hobby horse, and did not gauge the significance of the speech. "Here," he said, waving his hand towards the four sides of the square in which they stood, "the Romans built a camp. It crowned this hill, and was garrisoned by the tenth legion to overawe the turbulent tribes swarming on the plains below. In fact, this town is built within the camp, as the name shows."

"How does it show that?" asked Pratt, more to keep the vicar talking than because he cared.

"The name, man, the name. It is properly Coln-cester, but by usage has been shortened to Colester. Coln comes from the Latin *colonia,* a colony, and caster, or cester, is derived from *castra,* a camp. Coln-cester therefore means the camp colony, which proves that the original builders of this town erected their dwellings within the circumvallation of the original *castra* of Claudian. If you will come with me, Mr Pratt, I will show you the remains of this great work."

"I have seen it several times before," replied Pratt, rather bored by this archæological disquisition. "I know every inch of this place. It doesn't take an American centuries to get round, and six weeks of

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walking have fixed me up in your local geography. But there's the chapel, vicar. We might walk up there. I'd like to hear a few remarks on the subject of the chapel. Interesting. Oh, I guess so!"

"Certainly! certainly!" said Tempest, absently, "let us walk, walk," and he strolled away with his hands in his tail-coat pockets, looking something like an elderly jackdaw. Indeed the churchman, with his lean, oval face, his large spectacles and the fluttering black garments on his thin figure, very much resembled a bird. He was scholarly, well-bred and gentle, but wholly unworldly. Since his wife had died seven years before, Sybil had taken charge of the house. Harold Raston, the energetic curate, looked after the parish. But for these two, both clerical and domestic affairs would have been neglected, so immersed was Mr Tempest in his dry-as-dust explorations. Many people said openly that the vicar was past his work and should be pensioned off. Mrs Gabriel, a capable and managing woman, had once hinted as much to him. But the usually placid parson had flown into such a rage, that she had hastily withdrawn herself and her suggestion. "There is nothing more terrible than the rebellion of a sheep." Mrs Gabriel recalled this remark of Balzac's when Tempest, proving himself worthy of his name, swept her in wrath from his study.

Pratt was quite another specimen of humanity. A neat, dapper, suave little man, undersized yet perfectly proportioned. He had black hair, black eyes, and a clean-shaven face, which constantly wore an ex-

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pression of imperturbable good-humour. His dress was too neat for the country. A blue serge suit, white spats on brown boots, a Panama hat, gloves and—what he was never without—a smoothy-rolled umbrella. Spick-and-span, he might have stepped out of a glass case, and this was his invariable appearance. No one ever saw Pratt unshaven or untidy. He had been everywhere, had seen everything, and was a most engaging companion, never out of temper and never bored. But for all his smiling ways the villagers held aloof from him. Wishing to break down their barrier of prejudice, the sharp little American had attached himself to the vicar during the good man's usual morning walk. He thought that such a sight might dispose the villagers to relent.

"I shall not vary my usual walk," remarked Mr Tempest, positively. "We will stroll through the village, return to the chapel, and then, Mr Pratt, I hope you will lunch with me."

"Delighted, if it will not put Miss Sybil out."

"No, no. My wife is always prepared for chance visitors," answered the vicar, quite oblivious to the fact that the late Mrs Tempest was resting in the churchyard. "Ha, this is Mrs Jeal. How do you do, Mrs Jeal?"

Mrs Jeal was in excellent health, and said so with a curtsey. A dumpy, rosy-faced woman was Mrs Jeal, with a pair of extremely wicked black eyes which snapped fire when she was angered. She had a temper, but rarely displayed it, for it suited her better to gain her ends by craft rather than force. Fifteen

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years ago she had appeared from nowhere, to settle as a midwife in Colester. Contrary to their usual fashion, the villagers had taken her to their bosoms. This was owing to the clever way Mrs Jeal had of managing them, and to her knowledge of herbs. She had cured many sick people whom the doctor had given up, and consequently was not looked upon with favour by Dr James, who had succeeded to the family practice. But even he could not be angry at rosy, laughing Mrs Jeal. "Though I don't like her," confessed Dr James; "the devil looks out of her eyes. Dangerous woman, very dangerous."

Pratt had no chance of proving this remark of the doctor's to be true, for Mrs Jeal never looked at him. She kept her wicked eyes on the kindly vicar and smiled constantly, punctuating such smiles with an occasional curtsey. "Pearl is not with you?" said Mr Tempest.

"No, bless her poor heart!" cried Mrs. Jeal, "she is up at the chapel. Her favourite place is the chapel, as your reverence knows."

"She might have a worse place to haunt, Mrs Jeal. Poor soul—poor, mad, innocent child!"

"Do you call eighteen years of age childish, Mr Tempest?" asked the woman.

"No, no! I speak of her mind, her poor, weak mind. She is still a child. I beg of you to look after her, Mrs Jeal. We must make her path as pleasant as we may."

"Then I beg your reverence will tell that Barker to leave her alone."

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"Barker, Barker? Ah, yes, the sexton—of course. Worthy man."

Mrs Jeal sniffed. "He won't let her stay in the chapel," she said.

"Tut! tut! This must be seen to. Poor Pearl is God's child, Mrs Jeal, so she has a right to rest in His House. Yes, yes, I'll see to it. Good-day, Mrs Jeal."

The woman dropped a curtsey, and for the first time shot a glance at Pratt, who was smiling blandly. A nervous expression crossed her face as she caught his eye. The next moment she drew herself up and passed on, crossing herself. Pratt looked after her, still smiling, then hurried to rejoin the vicar, who began to explain in his usual wandering way.

"A good woman, Mrs Jeal, a good woman," he said. "For some years she has had charge of Pearl Darry, whom she rescued from her cruel father."

"Is that the insane girl?" said Pratt, idly.

"Do not talk of one so afflicted in that way, Mr Pratt. Pearl may not be quite right in her head, but she is sane enough to conduct herself properly. If the fact that she is not all herself reached Portfront"—the principal town of the county—"it is possible that the authorities might wish to shut her up, and that would be the death of Pearl. No, no!" said the good vicar, "let her have a fair share of God's beautiful earth, and live to a happy old age. In this quiet place we can afford one natural."

"Like the village idiot we read about in Scotch tales," said Pratt.

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"Just so, Mr Pratt. In *Waverley* there is such a one. Pearl Darry is quite harmless, and really has a very beautiful nature. Mrs Jeal is much to be commended for her charity."

"She looks a charitable woman," said the American, but whether he meant this ironically or not it is hard to say.

The women of Colester were mostly lace-workers, and toiled at this fairylike craft while their husbands worked in the fields below. During three seasons the mountain men, as they might be called, ploughed the meadow-land, sowed the corn and helped to reap and harvest it. In the winter they returned to live on their earnings and take a holiday. But the women worked all the year through, and Colester lace was famous. As the vicar and Pratt walked down the street, at the door of every house sat a woman with her pillow and pins dexterously making the filmy fabric which was destined to adorn the dress of many a London beauty. They were mostly serious-looking, and some even grim. But all had a smile for the vicar, although they pursed up their lips when they saw the good-natured face of Pratt. Most unaccountable this dislike they had for the American. He was rather annoyed by his pronounced unpopularity.

"I must really do something to make them like me," he said, much vexed.

"Tut, tut!" replied the vicar, "liking will come in good time, Mr Pratt. It takes some years for them to fancy a stranger. I was an object of distrust to

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them for quite three. Now they are devoted to me."

"And have you been here long?"

"About forty years," said Tempest. "I have buried many and christened most. We have no Methodists in Colester, Mr Pratt. Everyone comes to church and worships according to the rites of the Anglican communion, as is fit and proper."

"I suppose you are a prosperous community on the whole?"

"So, so! Nothing to complain of. The lace made here by those clever fingers sells well in London and even abroad. Then the men earn a fair wage in King's-meadows. Mrs Gabriel looks after the few poor we have amongst us. On the whole, we have much to be thankful for, Mr Pratt."

Thus talking the good vicar led his companion round by the mouldering walls, where they could look down on to the plains. After a glance they re-entered the town and walked through the cobbled-stoned streets, between the quaint, high-roofed houses. Everywhere the vicar was greeted and Pratt frowned upon. He was quite glad when they descended from the village through the old gate, and after walking along the neck, which was the fashionable part of Colester, began to climb up towards the chapel.

"A most delightful spot," said Pratt, politely; "but I guess the folk don't cotton to me. I must make them freeze on somehow."

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CHAPTER II

THE CRUSADERS' CHAPEL

THE church dedicated to St Gabriel the Messenger was enshrined in a leafy glade. No churlish wall marked the limits of the sacred ground, and from the ancient building a soft green sward stretched on all sides to the circle of oaks which sheltered it from the rude winds. In this circle were two openings counter to each other. The lower one admitted those who came from Colester into the precincts; the upper gave entrance to a larger glade, in which the dead had been buried for centuries. This also was without a wall, and it was strange beyond words to come suddenly upon an assemblage of tombstones in the heart of a wood. From this sylvan God's-acre a path climbed upward to the moor, and passed onward for some little distance until it was obliterated by the purple heather. Then for leagues stretched the trackless, treeless waste to the foot of distant hills.

Of no great size, the chapel was an architectural gem. Built in the form of a cross, a square tower rose where the four arms met, and this contained a famous peal of bells. The grey stone walls were carved with strange and holy devices, lettered with sacred texts in mediæval Latin, and here and there were draped in

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darkly-green ivy. The sharp angles of the building had been rounded by the weather, the stones were mellowed by time, and, nestling under the great boughs of the oaks, it had a holy, restful look. "Like a prayer made visible," said Mr Tempest.

With his companion he had paused at the entrance to the glade, so as to enjoy the beauty of the scene. Round the chapel swept the swallows, pigeons whirled aloft in the cloudless blue sky; from the leafy trees came the cooing of doves, and the cawing of rooks could be heard. All the wild life of the wood haunted the chapel, and the place was musical with forest minstrelsy. As the beauty of scene and sound crept into their hearts, the vicar quoted Spenser's lovely lines:—

"A little lowly hermitage it was,
Downe in a dale, hard by a forest side."

"Just so," said Pratt, in the hard, unromantic way of the twentieth century; "it's the kind of church you see in pictures."

"The church in which Sir Percival met Sir Galahad," replied Tempest.

The American felt the influence of the place despite the material faith which he held. There was a vein of romance in his nature which had been buried beneath the common-place and selfish. But in this holy solitude, at the door of the shrine, his spiritual self came uppermost, and when he stood bare-headed in the nave his talkative tongue was silent. The influence of the unseen surrounded him, and, like Moses,

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he was inclined to put off his shoes, "for this is holy ground," murmured his heart.

Glancing at his companion, Tempest was surprised to see his usually pale and calm face working with emotion and covered with blushes.

"You are unwell, Mr Pratt?" he asked in a low tone befitting the place.

The man stammered, "No—that is, I feel that—well, no matter." He controlled himself by a powerful effort and laughed. Tempest was not shocked. He was shrewd enough to see that the merriment was artificial and designed to cloak a deeper feeling. But the laughter was reproved in a most unexpected fashion.

"The joy of the profane is as the passing smoke," said a high, sweet voice.

Pratt started in surprise, and looked around. He saw the jewelled windows shining through the dim twilight of the church, the white cloth on the altar, and the glimmer of a silver crucifix, in the faint light of tall candles. But who had spoken he could not guess, as no one was in sight. Mr Tempest, however, had recognised the voice.

"Is that you, Pearl?" he called out softly.

From behind the altar emerged a girl of eighteen, though in looks and stature she was a child. She was small and delicately formed, and on her thin white face there was a vacant look as of one whose wits were astray. No intelligence shone through her dark eyes, but a mystical light burned in their depths. Like Kilmeny, she had been to fairyland, and had seen

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things which had lifted her above the common lot of mortals. Therefore upon her face there shone the light that never was on sea or land. And, curiously enough, she was dressed in a green gown—the fairy's colour. Round her straw hat was twisted a wreath of oak leaves. When she appeared her arms were full of flowers.

"You are decorating the altar, Pearl," said the vicar, kindly.

"I am making ready the House for the Master's coming," replied the girl in her silvery voice, "but He will abide here but a little time." She pointed to the groined roof of black oak. "That shuts out His Home," said Pearl, reverently, "and He loves not to dwell in darkness."

"Darkness and light are the same to Him, Pearl. But go on with your work, my child. You have beautiful flowers I see."

"I gathered them in the woods before dawn, when the dew was yet on them. And see, I have got these mosses to put into the pots. The flowers will be quite fresh to-morrow for morning service. Then they will die," added the girl, heaving a sigh, "die, as we all must."

"To rise again in the light of Heaven, child."

Pearl shook her black locks and turning back to the altar began dexterously to arrange the flowers. When passing and re-passing she never forgot to bend the knee. Pratt observed this. "Is she a Roman Catholic?" Mr Tempest smiled. "She does only what I have taught her," he said. "I am what is called

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High Church, Mr Pratt, and believe in a beautiful ritual. To the service of God we should bring all lovely things, and perform all solemn acts of humility and reverence. That," said Tempest, pointing to the white-covered altar, "is a symbol of the Unseen Power, and so those who approach it should acknowledge its solemn meaning."

Pratt shrugged his shoulders. The vicar was talking of things too high for his comprehension. He looked at the mad girl decorating the altar. "I suppose the villagers think a great deal of this church," he said.

"It is the most precious possession we have," replied Tempest, reverently, "and it is all that remains to us of the beautiful and sacred things created by the faith of our forefathers. There were many vessels for the altar, Mr Pratt; but these were melted down by the Gabriel who fought for the first Charles in order to help his king. I would we had a communion service as beautiful as this shrine," and Mr Tempest sighed.

The remark gave Pratt an idea. He wanted to obtain the goodwill of the villagers seeing he had come amongst them to pass his days in peace. If they loved their church so much they would approve of anyone who helped to decorate it. "I am not rich," he said slowly, "and I can't give you a whole service such as you want. But I should like to present this chapel with a communion cup. I have in my travels collected many beautiful things, Mr Tempest. Amongst others a golden cup of Roman workmanship which

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I obtained in Italy. It is a splendid example of the jeweller's art, and would look well on that table."

"On the altar," corrected Tempest, wincing at the sound of the word which he connected with the Low Church party. "It is more than good of you, Mr Pratt. We must talk the matter over. I do not accept gifts lightly, especially for the service of the Church. But come, let us look at the tombs. Then we can go to luncheon."

Pratt said no more, but fully made up his mind that the cup of which he spoke should figure on the altar. He had a vague kind of idea that he could buy repentance if he gave so splendid a present. If the vicar proved difficult to deal with, he resolved to ask for Mrs Gabriel's help. As the lady of the manor, she could insist upon the acceptance of the offering. There was no reason why Tempest should refuse it, but Pratt knew that the old man was—as he phrased it—queer, and one never knew what objection he might make. If he thought that the cup was given only to secure the goodwill of the parish he would certainly refuse it. A gift made in such a spirit could not be accepted by the Church.

Meanwhile he examined the tombs of the crusading Gabriels, which he had seen often before. But the vicar made the present visit more acceptable by recounting the legends connected with each recumbent figure. The tombs were three in number, and occupied what was called the Ladye's Chapel. Their sides were richly blazoned with the Gabriel crest and with decorations of scallop shells to denote that those who

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rested below had been to the Holy Land. The figures of the brave knights were cross-legged, and their hands rested on the pommels of their huge swords. Considering the lapse of time, they were in a wonderful state of preservation. Pratt looked upon them with a sigh, and the vicar inquired the reason of his sadness.

"I was thinking of the glory of having such ancestors," said Pratt, and Mr Tempest noticed that his Yankee twang and mode of expressing himself had quite disappeared. "I would give anything to come of such a line—to have a dwelling that had been in the possession of my race for centuries, and to have traditions which I could live up to. I am a lonely man, Mr Tempest," he added, with some pathos, "no one cares for me. I never had a home, or a family, or a position in the world. All my life I have had to fight for my own hand, and for years I have been a rolling stone. Money, yes! I have made money, but I would give it all," and he pointed to the crusaders, "if I could call those my ancestors."

Mr Tempest looked surprised. "I did not expect to hear such views from the mouth of a Republican," he said, "for, as you are an American, I presume you hold by the political faith of Washington."

"I don't hold by anything in particular," replied Pratt, recovering himself, as they left the chapel. "I am unfettered by sectarian prejudices. You can call me a cosmopolitan, Mr Tempest. But we can talk of these things on some other occasion. You must come to see me. I have furnished The Nun's House,

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and have got out my collection of rare and curious things. Will you and Miss Tempest dine with me next week?"

"I rarely go out," replied the vicar; "however, I will see what Sybil says. If she is willing, I will come with pleasure."

"Oh, Miss Tempest will be willing," said Pratt, significantly. "Leo Haverleigh is coming to dine also!"

"They are very good friends," said the vicar, simply. No thought of what Pratt meant entered his mind.

At the Vicarage they were met by Sybil and the curate, who had been talking to her about parish affairs for the greater part of the morning. At once Raston drew aside his ecclesiastical superior, and the two went into the library, leaving Sybil to entertain the American. She was not averse to doing this, as she liked Mr Pratt and his merry conversation. Having recovered from the emotion caused by the atmosphere of the chapel, the man was more pronouncedly Yankee than ever. He described his walk with the vicar, and repeated his invitation to dinner. "Mrs Gabriel and Mr Haverleigh are coming," he said, "and I shall also ask Sir Frank Hale and his sister."

Sybil smiled on hearing that Leo was to be present, but her brow clouded over when she heard about the baronet and Miss Hale. She did not like that young woman, and Pratt knew the cause. It was not unconnected with Leo. He was the prize for which these young ladies strove. Miss Hale was very much

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in love with the young man, and so was Sibyl, but he cared more for the vicar's daughter than for Miss Hale. The two girls guessed each other's feelings, and disliked one another accordingly. This might not have been proper, but it was eminently human. However, Sibyl was too much a woman of the world to show Pratt what she felt, and she accepted his invitation calmly enough. "I shall be delighted to come," she said, "but I can't answer for my father."

"Oh, I have something to lure him," said Pratt, easily, "and I think you will be pleased also, Miss Tempest." And thereupon he told the girl of his proposed gift. "The cup is over a thousand years old," he explained. "It belongs to the time of the Cæsars."

"From all I have heard of them," said Sybil, bluntly, "I don't think a vessel of their manufacture ought to serve for a Christian ceremony."

"On the contrary, the cup will be sanctified by being put to such a good use," said Pratt, "and you can set your mind at rest, Miss Tempest. I got the cup from the church of a little Italian town, where it served for a chalice. It has been used in the service of the Romish Church for ages."

"In that case I am sure my father will be delighted to accept it. He is anxious to get some vessels for the chapel altar. It is very good of you to give the cup, Mr Pratt."

"Not at all. It is better put to such use than in my collection. However, you will see all my curios

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when you come. Mr Haverleigh has already seen them."

"He told me about them yesterday. I only hope Mr Haverleigh will be here next week. He said something about going away."

"Why is he going away?" Pratt fixed his keen eyes on the girl.

"I think he is in trouble. That is," added Sybil, hastily, "I gathered as much. But don't say I told you anything, Mr Pratt. Ah," she broke off suddenly, "here are my father and Mr Raston."

Pratt cast another sharp glance at her. He guessed that something was wrong with Leo, and that the young man had told her of his trouble. He wondered if the two were engaged when they were thus confidential. Pratt took an interest in Leo, as he had known him for some years, and rather sympathised with his outbursts of youthful folly. He thought that marriage would steady the lad's somewhat volatile nature, but he could not make up his mind as to whether Miss Hale or Miss Tempest was the best wife for him. However, it was useless for Pratt to worry over this, as he recognised very clearly. In the first place, it was none of his business; and in the second, Leo would certrainly choose for himself.

"I am giving a house-warming, Mr Raston," said Pratt during luncheon, "and I should like you to come to dinner. Next Thursday. I suppose in this Arcadian spot it is not necessary to give written invitations."

"I accept with pleasure," replied Raston, quite ig-

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norant that Pratt wished to enlist him on his side in getting the vicar to accept the cup; "but as to written invitations—what do you say, Miss Tempest?"

"Oh, those are *most* necessary," laughed Sybil. "We are very particular in this part of the world."

"I am an American, you see, Miss Tempest, and I don't know your English way of doing things. But the invitations shall be written in due form. I guess it is as well to humour the prejudice of folks."

"If you wish to be popular," said the vicar, "you must do so here."

"As I intend to die in this part of the world, I must get on with the crowd somehow. I am not accustomed to be shunned, and that is what your people here are doing."

"Oh, no!" cried Sybil, much distressed, "they are only waiting to know you better, Mr Pratt. In a year you will be quite friendly with them."

"I'm friendly with them now," said Pratt, dryly, "it is they who hold off."

"We are slow to make friendships here," said Raston, "but when we do accept a friend we stick to him always."

"You are a native of these parts, Mr Raston?"

"I was born and bred here."

"It is I who am the stranger," put in Mr Tempest, "and it was a long time before my parishioners took to me."

"You are adored now, papa," said Sybil, with a bright glance.

"And someone else is adored also," put in Pratt.

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Sybil flushed at the compliment. She thought it was in bad taste.

After a time the conversation turned on Pearl Darry, and Raston, who was deeply interested in her, gave them some insight into the girl's mind. "She does not care for churches built by hands," he said. "If she had her way she would take the altar into the middle of the moor and worship there. I think she feels stifled under a roof."

"Ha!" said Pratt, with a swift glance, remembering Mrs Jeal, "is she of gipsy blood? She looks like it."

"No. Her dark complexion comes from Highland blood," explained Sybil. "Her father, Peter Darry, was a stone mason. He is dead now—died through drink. While working in Perth he married a farmer's daughter. They came back here and Pearl was born. Then her mother died and her father treated her badly. Mrs Jeal rescued her, and Peter fell over a cliff while drunk."

"Mrs Jeal is a good woman," said Tempest, mechanically.

"Do you endorse that statement, Miss Tempest?"

Sybil looked at Pratt who had spoken. "I think Mrs Jeal was very good to take charge of Pearl," she said evasively, whereat Pratt smiled to himself. He saw that Sybil did not like the woman, and privately admired her insight.

Mr Pratt was destined to deliver all his invitations verbally. On his way home after the vicar's luncheon he met with a rider on a roan horse. This was a fair,

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handsome young man with a clear skin, a pair of bright blue eyes and a sunny look on his face. He had a remarkably good figure, and rode admirably. Horse and man made a picture as they came up the road. Pratt waved his hands and the rider pulled up.

"How are you this morning, Haverleigh?"

Leo laughed. He did not wear his heart on his sleeve, and if he was worried, as Sybil averred, he did not show his vexation. "I am all right," he replied, with a smile. "Who could help being all right in this jolly weather? And how are you, Mr Pratt?"

"I am busy," responded the American, gravely. "I have been lunching with the vicar, and now I am going home to write out invitations for a dinner at my new house."

"Will you ask me, Mr Pratt?"

"I have asked Miss Tempest and I want you to come."

Leo laughed. Also he flushed a trifle. "It is very good of you," he said. "And who else will be at your house-warming?"

"Mrs Gabriel, Mr Raston, Miss Hale and her brother."

"Oh!" Leo looked annoyed at the mention of Miss Hale. "I am not sure if I shall be able to come," he said, after a pause.

"No?" Pratt's tone was quite easy. "Miss Tempest said something about your going away. But I hope you will put that off. My dear fellow"—Pratt

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smiled meaningly—"you can depend upon me. It is not the first time I have helped you!"

Haverleigh made no direct response, but sat on his saddle in deep thought. "I'll come," he said at length, and rode off abruptly.

"I thought you would," murmured Pratt, with a bland smile. He knew more about Leo Haverleigh than most people in Colester.

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CHAPTER III

HAVERLEIGH'S face did not continue to wear its sunny expression after he left the American. He frowned and bit his moustache, and in the annoyance of the moment spurred his horse full speed up the castle road. Only when he was within the avenue and nearing the porch did he slacken speed, for his mother —so he called her—might be looking out of some window. If so, she would assuredly accuse him of ill-using his horse. Mrs Gabriel rarely minced matters in her dealings with Leo. He was never perfectly sure whether she loved or hated him.

Mindful of this, he rode gently round to the stables, and, after throwing his reins to a groom, walked into the castle by a side door. As he had been absent all the morning, he was not very sure of his reception, and, moreover, he had eaten no luncheon. The butler informed him that Mrs Gabriel had asked that he should be sent to her the moment he returned. At onc Leo sought her on the south terrace, where she was walking in the hot June sunshine. He augured ill from her anxiety to see him. A memory of his debts and other follies—pardonable enough—burdened his conscience.

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"Here I am, mother," he said as he walked on to the terrace, looking a son of whom any woman would have been proud. Perhaps if he had really been her son, instead of her nephew, Mrs Gabriel might have been more lenient towards him. As it was she treated him almost as harshly as Roger Ascham did Lady Jane Grey of unhappy memory.

"It is about time you were here," she said in her strong, stern voice. "As you are so much in London, I think you might give me a few hours of your time when you condescend to stay at the castle."

Leo threw himself wearily into a stone seat and played with his whip. This was his usual greeting, and he knew that Mrs Gabriel would go on finding fault and blaming him until she felt inclined to stop. His only defence was to keep silent. He therefore stared gloomily on the pavement and listened stolidly to her stormy speech. "No reverence for women—after all I have done for you—clownish behaviour," etc.

Some wit had once compared Mrs Gabriel to Agnes de Montfort, that unpleasant heroine of the Middle Ages. The comparison was a happy one, for Mrs Gabriel was just such another tall, black-haired, iron-faced Amazon. She could well have played the *rôle* of heroine in holding the castle against foes, and without doubt would have been delighted to sustain a siege. The present days were too tame for her. She yearned for the time when ladies were left in charge of the *donjon* keep, while their husbands went out to war. More than once she fancied that if she had

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lived in those stirring times, she would have armed herself like Brittomart, and have gone a disguised knight-errant for the pleasure and danger of the thing. As it was, she found a certain relief in the power she exercised in Colester. Her will was law in the town, and her rule quite feudal in its demand for absolute obedience.

Report said that the late John Gabriel had not been altogether sorry when he departed this life. Undoubtedly he was more at rest in the quiet graveyard near the chapel than he had ever been before. Mrs Gabriel mourned him just as much as she thought proper. She had never professed to love him, and had married him (as she calmly admitted) in order to become mistress of the grand old castle. Besides, Gabriel had always hampered her desire to rule, as he had sufficient of the old blood in him to dislike being a cypher in his ancestral home. Consequently, husband and wife quarrelled bitterly. Finally, he died, gladly enough, and the Amazon had it all her own way. It was about two years after his death that Leo came to live with her, and everyone was amazed that she should behave so kindly towards the child of her dead brother, whom, as it was well known, she hated thoroughly.

However, Leo came, and from the moment he entered the house she bullied him. Spirited as the boy was, he could not hold his own against her stern will and powers of wrathful speech. When he went to school and college he felt as though he had escaped from gaol, and always returned unwillingly to Col-

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ester. Mrs Gabriel called this ingratitude, and on every occasion brought it to his mind. She did so now; but even this could not induce Leo to speak. He declined to furnish fuel to her wrath by argument or contradiction. This also was a fault, and Mrs Gabriel mentioned it furiously.

"Can't you say something?" she cried, with a stamp. "Is it any use your sitting there like a fool? What explanation have you for me?"

"To what?" asked Leo, wearily; the question had been asked so often. "You have accused me of so many things."

"Then why do you do wrong? I am talking of those debts you have incurred in London. You gave the list to me before you went out riding."

"I know, mother. I thought it best to avoid a scene. But it seems there is no escape. When you have quite done perhaps you will let me speak?"

"You shall speak when I choose," rejoined Mrs Gabriel, fiercely. "All I ask you now is, how comes it that your debts run up to three hundred pounds? I allow you that income. You should make it do."

"Perhaps I have been a little foolish," began Leo, but she cut him short.

"A little foolish, indeed! You have behaved like a fool, as you always do. What right have you to be extravagant? Are you in a position to be so? Have I not fed and clothed and educated you?"

"You have done everything that a charitable woman could have done."

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"You mean that a *mother* could have done. Had you been my own child—"

"You might have been kinder to me," finished the young man.

Mrs Gabriel stared aghast at this speech, and at last broke out furiously, "Had you been my own child you would have been a stronger man; not a weak fool squandering money, and defying your benefactress. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I am," replied Leo, bitterly, "ashamed that I have endured this humiliating position for so long. I was only a child when you brought me here, and had no voice in the matter. Yet, out of gratitude, I have borne with your injustice, and—"

"Injustice!" broke in Mrs Gabriel. "What do you mean?"

"My meaning is not hard to gather, mother. You have never been just to me, and the bread with which you have fed me has been bitter enough to swallow. Do you think that I can go on listening to your angry words without a protest? I cannot. My position is not of my own making, and since you find me a burden and an ungrateful creature, the best thing will be to put an end to the position."

"Indeed!" sneered the woman. "And how do you propose to do that? You are quite unable to earn your own living."

"Oh, there is one way of doing that," replied Leo, grimly. "It does not need much education to be a soldier."

"A soldier!" screamed Mrs Gabriel.

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"Yes. I made inquiries while I was in London, as I knew very well what welcome you would give me. It is my intention to volunteer for the war."

"You'll do nothing of the sort."

"I beg your pardon. I have made up my mind."

"Then I shall have nothing more to do with you."

"That is as you please, Mrs Gabriel. You are my aunt, and I suppose you have no right to support me out of charity. At any rate, you have no right to keep me here and taunt me all the time with my inability to keep myself. Again I say that the position is none of my making. However, I intend to relieve you of the burden of a useless man. Next week I shall enlist. Then you will be well rid of me."

Mrs Gabriel gasped. "I forbid you!" she cried, with a stamp.

"I am afraid I must decline to accept the command," said Haverleigh, with great coolness. "You have told me often enough that I am a beggar and a loafer. You shall do so no longer. As to my debts, I shall see to them myself. You need not pay them, nor need you continue my allowance. I earn my own bread from this moment."

"How dare you, Leo? Do you not owe me something?"

"No! You have cancelled all obligation by the way in which you have treated me. Everything you have done has been done grudgingly. If you did not intend to behave as a woman should, why, in Heaven's name, did you not leave me to be dependent on

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strangers? They could scarcely have been more harsh to me than you have been. But this is the end of it. I relieve you from this hour of the burden you complain of."

"Take care. I intended you to be my heir, and—"

"I decline to accept further favours at your hands," said Leo, proudly; "for what you have done I thank you, but I do not care to accept an inheritance as a favour. Now you know my intentions and I shall not change them."

Mrs Gabriel raged for twenty minutes without making the least impression on the young man. He was determined to put an end to the position, and she found that she could not longer dominate him by her wrath. Then Mrs Gabriel became aware that she had driven him like a rat into a corner, and that, like a rat, he had turned to fight. For reasons best known to herself she did not wish him to leave her. Forthwith she abandoned her tyrannical attitude, and took refuge in the weakness of her sex. Considering her boasting, this was ironical.

"It is cruel of you, Leo, to behave thus to a woman who loves you!"

Leo, leaning over the parapet, shrugged his shoulders and replied without looking round. "That is just the point," he said. "You really do not love me—no, not one little bit."

"I do. See how I have looked after you all these years."

"And made me feel that I was a pauper all the

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time," he retorted. "But is it necessary to go over all the old ground? I have made up my mind."

"You shall not enlist."

"I tell you I shall."

The two faced one another, both pale and both defiant. It was a contest of will, and the weaker would be sure to yield in the long run. Mrs Gabriel quite expected that her adopted son would give in, as he had often done before, but this time she found to her surprise that he declined to move from his attitude of defiance. Seeing that she was beaten, she suddenly calmed and proceeded to win the necessary victory in another and more crafty way.

"Sit down, Leo," she said quietly. "It is time we had an explanation. You are behaving very badly, and I must request you at least to listen to me."

Haverleigh had been doing nothing else for nearly an hour, so this speech was a trifle inconsistent. However, he could not be brutal, so with another shrug he resumed his seat. All the same he was resolved in his own mind that no argument she could use should make him alter the course he had determined upon. Leo could be obstinate on occasions.

"I do everything I can for your good," said Mrs Gabriel in a complaining tone, "yet you thwart me at every turn." Then she proceeded to recount how she had sent him to Eton, to Oxford, how she had permitted him to go to London and allowed him money, and how he had behaved foolishly. It was at this point the young man interrupted her.

"I admit that I have been foolish, but that comes

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from want of experience. You can't expect me to have an old head on young shoulders."

"Don't interrupt me, please," said Mrs Gabriel, sharply. "Now that you have sown your wild oats, I want you to come here and take your position as my heir. I am no longer so young as I was, and I need someone to help me in administering the estate. Besides, I want you to marry."

Leo rose from his seat. "You wish me to marry," said he; then, after a pause, he proceeded sarcastically, "And I suppose you have chosen me a wife?"

"Just so," said Mrs Gabriel, coolly. "I want you to marry Miss Hale."

"Not if there was not another woman in the world!"

"That's all nonsense, Leo. She has a good dowry and she is an agreeable girl. You *shall* marry her."

"I don't love her," protested Leo.

"No matter; she loves you. Her brother told me so, and I am woman enough to see that she is deeply attached to you."

"I won't marry her!" said Leo, doggedly. "I have a right to choose a wife for myself, and Miss Hale is not my choice."

"Ah! Then what I have heard is true?"

"What have you heard?" he demanded, with a dangerous look in his blue eyes. Mrs Gabriel was going too far.

"That you are in love with Sibyl Tempest."

"That is true. She is a beautiful and charming girl."

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"And a beggar!" burst out Mrs Gabriel, savagely. "Her father has nothing beyond his stipend, and that he spends on books. When he dies she will be a beggar. If you married her she would bring you no dowry."

"She will bring me herself," replied Haverleigh, "and that is good enough for me. I love Sybil with my whole soul."

"And how do you propose to keep her?" sneered Mrs Gabriel.

"Not as the heir to your property," said Leo, wrathfully. "In some way or another I shall make my way in the world. Sybil is quite willing to wait for me. We are engaged."

"Ha! You seem to have settled the whole matter."

"We have. And it will not be unsettled by anyone."

The young man looked so determined, there was such fire in his eye, such a firmness about his closed mouth, that Mrs Gabriel felt that she was beaten. For the moment she retreated gracefully, but by no means gave up her point. By nagging at Leo she might be enabled to bring about things as she wished. "Well, have it your own way," she said, rising. "I have said my say, and you are behaving abominably."

"I am sorry you should think so, but I really cannot submit to this life any longer. You quite understand that next week I go to London?"

"As you please." Mrs Gabriel was outwardly calm, but inwardly furious. "I hope you have well considered what you are doing?"

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"I have. My mind has been made up for some time."

"In that case, Leo, we may as well part good friends. I shall pay your debts and fit you out. Now do not contradict me. If you have any feeling of gratitude you will at least let me do this much."

Haverleigh did not like the proposition, as he felt that Mrs Gabriel was preparing some snare into which he might blindly fall. However, as he could not see his way to a refusal, and, moreover, was weary of this bickering, he merely bowed. Mrs Gabriel had thus gained time, and in some measure had secured the victory. It remained to her to make the best use of it. She was determined that Leo should marry Edith Hale.

"Have you had luncheon, Leo?" she asked, changing the subject.

"No. But I am not hungry now."

"Nonsense. A big man like you. Come in and have something to eat at once."

As a refusal would only have meant another outburst, Leo accepted the inevitable, and moved towards the door with his mother. "By the way," he said, "I met Mr Pratt down below. He intends to ask us to a house-warming."

It might have been Leo's fancy, but he thought that Mrs Gabriel started at the mention of the name. However, there was an emotion in her hard voice as she replied, "I shall be rather glad to see the interior of his house, Leo. It is said that he has the most beautiful things. Will he ask us to dinner?"

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"Yes. Hale and his sister are coming."

"Ah!" said Mrs Gabriel in gratified tones.

"And the vicar and his daughter. Also Raston, the curate."

"The church party," said Mrs Gabriel, disdainfully. She had no love for Tempest, whom she regarded as half insane, nor for Sibyl, who was too beautiful for womanly taste, nor for Raston, who had frequently fought her on questions connected with parish affairs.

"By the way," said Leo, who had been meditating, "why has Mr Pratt settled in these parts? I should think he found it dull."

Mrs Gabriel smiled contemptuously. "Mr Pratt is not a foolish young man like someone I know," she said; "he does not find pleasure in the follies of the Town. For my part, I think he is wise to settle here in his old age. He is a delightful neighbour and a pleasant companion."

"He is all that," assented Leo, heartily. He liked Pratt. "You have known him for many years, mother?"

"For ten or twelve," replied Mrs Gabriel, carelessly. "I met him in Vienna, I think, and he called on me when I returned to London. Afterwards he came down here and fell in love with the place. For years he has been a rolling stone, but always said that when he settled down he would come to Colester. He is liked, is he not, Leo?"

"He is more than liked. He is immensely popular —with our friends, if not with the villagers. You

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have done a good deed in introducing him to our dull parish."

"I don't think Mr Pratt, who has so many resources in himself, finds it dull, my dear. However, I shall be glad to accept the invitation to his dinner. I should like to see him married."

"Indeed! Have you chosen him a wife also?"

Mrs Gabriel laughed. "I thought he might take a fancy to Sibyl Tempest."

"Why, he's old enough to be her father. Besides—"

"Besides you love her," finished Mrs Gabriel, with a shrug. "Well, do not get angry, Leo. I should like to see Mr Pratt marry Sybil and you the husband of Edith Hale. Then everything would be right."

"I don't think so at all," commenced Haverleigh in vexed tones. "But don't let us quarrel any more. I have the greatest regard for Pratt, but I do not care to go the length of letting him marry the girl I love."

"You know very little of Mr Pratt," said Mrs Gabriel, looking suddenly at the young man, "how, then, can you regard him so—"

"Oh, I have seen him often in Town," broke in Leo; "sometimes when I was in difficulties and did not want to tell you Pratt helped me."

"With money?" asked Mrs Gabriel, sharply.

"Of course with money. But I paid him back."

Mrs Gabriel made no answer, but, rising suddenly, passed out of the room, and left Leo eating his luncheon alone. Her usually calm face looked dis-

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turbed and her hands were restless. Leo's information had annoyed her.

"What does Pratt mean?" she asked herself. "Can't he leave the boy alone after all these years? I wonder—" She broke off and pressed her hand to her heart as though she there felt a cruel pain. Perhaps she did, but Mrs Gabriel was not the woman to show it.

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CHAPTER IV

THE DINNER-PARTY

BUILT on the lower slopes of the Castle Hill, Mr Pratt's residence, commonly known as The Nun's House, stood a little distance back from the high-way which led down to King's-meadows. It was a plain, rough stone building of great strength, two storeys in height, and with a high roof of slate. Gloomy in the extreme, it was rendered still more so from its being encircled by a grove of yew trees which gave it a churchyard air. Not the kind of residence one would have thought attractive to a cheerful and dapper man like Richard Pratt. But he had, so he declared, fallen in love with it at first sight, and Mrs Gabriel, always having an eye to business, had only too readily granted him a seven years' lease. She was delighted at the chance of securing a tenant, as the house had been empty for a long time owing to its uncomfortable reputation. There was not a man, woman or child in Colester that did not know it was haunted.

The name came from a tradition, probably a true one, that when the Colester convent had been suppressed by Henry VIII., the evicted nuns had found refuge in this dismal house, a dozen of them. In time they died, and the mansion was inhabited by other

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people. But queer sounds were heard, strange sights were seen, and it became known that the twelve nuns re-visited the scene of their exile. There never was a house so populated with ghosts; and the tenants promptly departed. Others, lured by a low rent, came, and after a month's trial departed also. Finally no one would stop in the ill-omened mansion until Mr Pratt arrived. He liked the place, laughed at the gruesome reputation of the dwelling, and announced his intention of making it his home.

"Ghosts!" laughed Pratt, with his cheery smile. "Nonsense. Ghosts went out with gas. Besides, I should rather like to see a ghost, particularly of a nun. I am partial to the fair sex."

"I wonder, then, you never married," said the person who had warned him against the house, with the best intentions, of course.

Pratt looked at her—she was Mrs Bathurst, the gossip of the neighbourhood—under half-closed eyelids, and smiled. "Ah!" said he, rubbing his plump white hands, "I have admired so many beautiful women, dear lady, that I could not remain constant to one;" which reason, although plausible, did not satisfy Mrs Bathurst. But then she was one of those amiable persons always willing to believe the worst of people.

However, Pratt took up his abode in the chief Colester inn, and sent for cartloads of furniture, while the house was being re-decorated. He took a deal of trouble to make it comfortable, and as he was a man of excellent taste, with an eye for colour, he succeeded in making it pretty as well. In six weeks the place

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was ready to receive him, and up to the period of his walk with the vicar, Pratt had occupied it for another six without being disturbed by the numerous ghosts. The Colester folks quite expected to hear that he had been carried off like Dr Faust, and were rather disappointed that he met with no ghostly adventure. But then Mr Pratt, as he said himself, was not imaginative enough for spectres.

Failing his leaving the house, the gentry expected that he would entertain them and show his treasures, for it was reported that he had many beautiful things. But Pratt was in no hurry. He wanted first to study his neighbours in order to see who were the most pleasant. In a surprisingly short time he got to know something about everyone, and on the knowledge thus acquired he selected his guests. In addition to those already mentioned, he invited Mrs Bathurst and her daughter Peggy. The girl was pretty and the mother talkative, so, in Pratt's opinion, it paid to ask them. "There is no chance of an entertainment being dull if Mrs Bathurst has her legs under the table," he said, and this being reported to the lady, she accused Pratt of coarseness. Nevertheless, she accepted the invitation. Not for worlds would Mrs Bathurst have missed a sight of re-decorated Nun's House. Besides, it was her duty to go. She supplied all the gossip of the neighbourhood.

Anxious to see as much as possible of the house, Mrs Bathurst was the first to arrive. Pratt, in a particularly neat evening dress, advanced to meet her and Peggy with a smile. He knew very well that her

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ungovernable curiosity had led her to be thus early. "I am glad to see you, Mrs Bathurst," he said genially; "pray sit down. You are the first to arrive."

"I always like to be punctual," responded the lady, nodding to her daughter that she also should be seated. "Dear me, how well this room looks! I can see you have spared no expense."

"I like to make myself comfortable, Mrs Bathurst. We only have one life."

"I wonder you care to spend it in such a dull place as Colester. If Mr Bathurst were rich I should make him take me to London."

"You would soon get tired of the roar of that city."

Here Peggy, who was fair and pretty and fond of gaiety, shook her blonde head vigorously. "I should never get tired of fun," she said. "I could go to a dance every night and still want more."

"Ah, Miss Peggy, you are young and active!"

"Well, dear Mr Pratt, you are not old," said Mrs Bathurst, flatteringly; "we must make you happy here. I am sure you are quite an acquisition. We must find you a wife."

"I shall apply to you when I want one," he said, with a laugh; "but I guess I'm not made to run in double harness."

"What odd expressions you use! I daresay that comes from your being an American. Never mind, you'll soon lose all Americanisms here. I look upon you as quite one of ourselves, dear Mr Pratt."

The fact is that Mrs Bathurst wished to bring about a marriage between her daughter Peggy and the

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newcomer. He had been introduced by Mrs Gabriel, so his social position was secure; and if one could judge from the magnificent furnishing of the house, he was a wealthy man. That Peggy herself should be consulted never entered her mother's head.

Pratt guessed what Mrs Bathurst was after, and chuckled. He had no intention of having the good lady for a mother-in-law. Moreover, he knew that Peggy was in love with Raston, the curate. Nevertheless, having a love of tormenting people, and wishing to punish Mrs Bathurst, he sighed, cast a languishing look at Peggy, and allowed the mother to think that he might be guided by her wish. Seeing this, the lady pushed her advantage vigorously, and was getting on very well by the time the other guests arrived. Then, after some desultory conversation, dealing with the weather and the crops, all went in to dinner.

The table was beautifully set out. The linen was snowy white, the silver and crystal of the best, and the flowers, which Pratt had personally arranged, were skilfully chosen and blended. The women present were rather annoyed that a man should be able to manage a house so well, for the dinner was one of the best that had ever been eaten in Colester, and the service was all that could be desired. What was the use, thought Mrs Bathurst, of suggesting a wife to a man who knew so well how to dispense with one? She could not have arranged things better herself, and it was vexing that a mere man should be able to beat a woman on her own ground.

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"You have certainly made a very pretty place of it, Mr Pratt," said Mrs Gabriel, when they returned to the drawing-room. "I suppose you will live here for many a long day?"

"I hope to die here," he replied, smiling. "But one never knows. I may take a fancy to resume my travels."

"You are like Ulysses," put in the vicar, "you know men and cities."

"And, like Ulysses, I don't think much of either, Mr Tempest."

"Come now!" cried Leo, laughing. "I never heard that Ulysses was a cynic."

"He was not modern enough," said Sybil, who was looking particularly charming, much to the anger of Mrs Gabriel, who saw in her a man-trap for her adopted son.

"I don't think cynicism is altogether a modern disease," remarked Sir Frank Hale. "Solomon had not much belief in human nature."

"What could you expect from a man who had so many wives?" put in Pratt, in a dry voice. The remark annoyed Mrs Bathurst. It augured ill for her scheme to marry Peggy. A man who talked thus of women could never be brought to respect his mother-in-law.

While this conversation was taking place Mrs Gabriel kept a vigilant eye on Leo. Whenever he tried to edge up to Sybil she contrived to get in the way, and, finally, by a dexterous move, she placed him 'longside the baronet's sister. Edith Hale was a tall, raw-boned,

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thin girl, with small pretensions to beauty or wit. She had a freckled skin and red hair, an awkward way of carrying herself and a silent tongue. She was so deeply in love with Leo that she followed his every movement with her eyes, until he found her regard most embarrassing. However, Leo, to avert a storm when he returned home, was obliged to show her every attention, and strolled away with her into Mr Pratt's new conservatory. Sybil looked disappointed, but controlled herself sufficiently to play an accompaniment for Peggy. Raston turned over the leaves of the music, and Mrs Bathust, with a glance at Pratt, settled herself to listen. As to Mr Tempest, he was moving round the room examining the objects of art in his usual near-sighted way. Seeing everyone thus occupied, Mrs Gabriel drew aside Sir Frank into a convenient corner.

The baronet was a pale-faced, hunchback, lame creature, with a shrewish expression and a pair of brilliant grey eyes. He had been an invalid all his life, and his temper had been spoilt thereby. The only person in the world for whom he cherished the least affection was his sister. In his eyes she was as beautiful as Helen and as clever as Madame de Stael. He knew that she was breaking her heart for Leo, and resented the young man's indifference. And as Hale had the spite of a cripple, his resentment was not to be despised. But Leo did not know that.

"Frank," said Mrs Gabriel, addressing him thus familiarly, as she had known him from his cradle,

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"I want to speak to you about Leo. It is time he was married. Nothing but marriage will steady him."

"Sybil Tempest is ready enough to become his wife, Mrs Gabriel," snarled the little man. "Why don't you speak to her?"

"Because she is not your sister," replied Mrs Gabriel, coldly. "I do not intend that Leo shall throw himself away on a penniless girl who has nothing but her face to recommend her. Edith has both brains and beauty."

"Leo does not see that," said Hale, who implicitly believed in his companion; "he is infatuated with Sybil. I don't say a word against her," he added hastily; "I want to marry her myself."

Mrs Gabriel looked with secret contempt on the deformed man, and wondered how he could have the impertinence to think that any woman could take him for her husband. However, she was pleased to hear of this new complication. If Sybil could be induced to marry the baronet—and from a worldly point of view the match was a good one—she would be out of the way. In despair Leo might marry Edith, and thus all would be as Mrs Gabriel wanted. She wished to move human beings as puppets to suit her own ends, and never thought that she might be thwarted by the individual will of those with whom she played. However, she had an idea of how to entangle matters so as to carry out her schemes, and commenced her intrigue with the baronet. She knew he would help her, both for his own sake and for the sake of his sister. At the same time she moved warily, so as not to make

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a false step. It was no easy matter to deal with Hale, as she knew. Once or twice he had got the better of her in business.

"I don't mind being candid with you," said Mrs Gabriel softly. "It is my wish that Leo should marry Edith, and I shall be delighted to help you to become Sybil's husband."

"It's easy saying, but harder doing," said Hale, snappishly. "Sybil is in love with Leo, and the woman who admires Apollo will not look upon Caliban. Oh, I am under no delusions respecting myself," he added, with a hoarse laugh. "I am not agreeable to look upon, but I have money, a title and a good position. Nine women out of ten would be content with these things."

"I am afraid Sybil is the tenth," said Mrs Gabriel, coldly. "However, neither she nor Leo know what is good for them. Help me to marry him to your sister, and then Sybil will fall into your arms."

"Do you think so?"

"I am certain of it."

"How are we to manage?" asked Hale, after a pause. "You have some scheme."

"It is in order to explain my scheme to you that I have brought about this conversation. Listen. I am not pleased with Leo. He has been leading a wild life in Town, and is in debt to the tune of three hundred pounds."

"Humph!" said Frank, under his breath. "These Apollos know how to waste money. I shall see that Edith's dowry is settled on herself."

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"And I shall tie up the Gabriel property so that Leo cannot waste it."

Hale looked at her from under his bushy eyebrows. "You intend that he shall be your heir, then?"

"Assuredy. If he does what I want him to do."

"What is that?"

"He must marry Edith and take up his residence in the castle. No more gadding about, no more wild living. Let Leo be a respectable country gentleman and his future is secure."

"Have you explained that to him?" asked the baronet, sharply.

'No. Leo is a fool, and infatuated with that girl. I must force him to do what I want. It is for his own good. You must help, both for the sake of Edith, and because it is your only chance of marrying Sybil."

"I'm quite ready to help you, Mrs Gabriel. Go on."

Mrs Gabriel glanced round, bent her head, and spoke lower. "I intend to refuse to pay this three hundred pounds for Leo. There is no chance of his earning it for himself, and he will soon be in serious difficulty. Now if you come forward as his old friend and—"

"I don't like lending money," said Hale, who was something of a miser.

"If you want to gain Sybil and make your sister happy, you must lend Leo three hundred pounds. When he is in your debt, well—the rest is easy."

Hale nodded. "I see what you mean," said he,

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