

Ellen Wood



Verner's Pride

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VERNER'S PRIDE.

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BY THE AUTHORESS OF "EAST LYNNE."



CHAPTER I. RACHEL FROST.

THE slanting rays of the afternoon sun, drawing towards the horizon, fell on a fair scene of country life. Flickering through the young foliage of the oak and lime-trees, touching the budding hedges, resting on the growing grass, all so lovely in their early green, and lighting up with flashes of yellow fire the windows of the fine mansion, that, rising on a gentle eminence, looked down on that fair scene as if it were its master, and could boast the ownership of those broad lands, of those gleaming trees.

Not that the house possessed much attraction for those whose taste savoured of the antique. No time-worn turrets were there, or angular gables, or crooked eaves, or mullioned Gothic casements, so chary of glass that modern eyes can scarcely see in or out: neither was the edifice constructed of grey stone, or of bricks gone black and green with age. It was a handsome, well-built white mansion, giving the promise of desirable rooms inside, whose chimneys did not smoke or their windows rattle, and where there was sufficient space to turn in. The lower windows opened on a gravelled terrace, which ran along the front of the house, a flight of steps descending from it in its midst. Gently sloping lawns extended from the terrace, on either side the steps and the broad walk which branched from them; on which lawns shone gay parterres of flowers, already scenting the air, and giving

promise of the advancing summer. Beyond were covered walks, affording a shelter from the sultry noontide sun; shrubberies and labyrinths of many turnings and windings, so suggestive of secret meetings, were secret meetings desirable; groves of scented shrubs exhaling their perfume; cascades and rippling fountains; mossy dells, concealing the sweet primrose, the sweeter violet; and verdant sunny spots open to the country round, to the charming distant scenery, on whose benches you could sit and feast the eyes through the live-long summer day.

It was not summer yet—scarcely spring—and the sun, I say, was drawing to its setting, lighting up the large clear panes of the windows as with burnished gold. The house, the ornamental grounds, the estate around, all belonged to Mr. Verner. It had come to him by bequest, not by entailed inheritance. Busy-bodies were fond of saying that it never ought to have been his; that if the strict law of right and justice had been observed, it would have gone to his elder brother; or, rather, to that elder brother's son. Old Mr. Verner, the father of these two brothers, had been a modest country gentleman, until one morning when he awoke to the news that valuable mines had been discovered on his land. The mines brought him in gold, and in his later years he purchased this estate, pulled down the house that was upon it—a high, narrow, old

thing, looking like a crazy tower or a capacious belfry—and had erected this one, calling it “Verner’s Pride.”

An appropriate name. For if ever poor human man was proud of a house he has builded, old Mr. Verner was proud of that—proud to folly. He laid out money on it in plenty; he made the grounds, belonging to it, beautiful and seductive as a fabled scene from fairy-land; and he wound up by leaving it to the younger of his two sons.

These two sons constituted all his family. The elder had gone into the army early, and left for India; the younger had remained always with his father, the helper of his money-making, the sharer of the planning out and building of Verner’s Pride, the joint resident there after it was built. The elder son—Captain Verner then—paid one visit only to England, during which visit he married and took his wife out with him when he went back. These long-continued separations, however much we may feel inclined to gloss over the fact, do play strange havoc with home-affections, wearing them away inch by inch.

The years went on and on. Captain Verner became Colonel Sir Lionel Verner, and a boy of his had been sent home in due course, and was at Eton. Old Mr. Verner grew near to death. News went out to India that his days were numbered, and Sir Lionel Verner was bade get leave of absence, if possible, and start for home without a

day's loss, if he would see his father alive. "If possible," you observe, they put to the request, for the Sikhs were at that time giving trouble in our Indian possessions, and Colonel Verner was one of the experienced officers least likely to be spared.

But there is a mandate that must be obeyed whenever it comes—grim, imperative death. At the very hour when Mr. Verner was summoning his son to his death-bed, at the precise time that military authority in India would have said, if asked, that Colonel Sir Lionel Verner could *not* be spared, death had marked out that brave officer for his own especial prey. He fell in one of the skirmishes that took place near Moultan, and the two letters—one going to Europe with tidings of his death, the other going to India with news of his father's illness—crossed each other on the route.

"Steevy," said old Mr. Verner to his younger son, after giving a passing lament to Sir Lionel, "I shall leave Verner's Pride to you."

"Ought it not to go to the lad at Eton, father?" was the reply of Stephen Verner.

"What's the lad at Eton to me?" cried the old man. "I'd not have left it away from Lionel, as he stood first, but it has always seemed to me that you had the most right to it; that to leave it away from you savoured of injustice. You were at its building, Steevy; it has been your home as much

as it has been mine; and I'll never turn you from it for a stranger, let him be whose child he may. No, no! Verner's Pride shall be yours. But, look you, Stephen! you have no children, bring up young Lionel as your heir, and let it descend to him after you."

And that is how Stephen Verner had inherited Verner's Pride. Neighbouring gossipers, ever fonder of laying down the law for other people's business than of minding their own, protested against it among themselves as a piece of injustice. Had they cause? Many very just-minded persons would consider that Stephen Verner possessed more fair claim to it than the boy at Eton.

I will tell you of one who did not consider so. And that was the widow of Sir Lionel Verner. When she arrived from India with her other two children, a son and daughter, she found old Mr. Verner dead, and Stephen the inheritor. Deeply annoyed and disappointed, Lady Verner deemed that a crying wrong had been perpetrated upon her and hers. But she had no power to undo it.

Stephen Verner had strictly fulfilled his father's injunctions touching young Lionel. He brought up the boy as his heir. During his educational days at Eton and at college, Verner's Pride was his holiday home, and he subsequently took up his permanent residence at it. Stephen Verner, though long married, had no children.

One daughter had been born to him years ago, but had died at three or four years old. His wife had died a very short while subsequent to the death of his father. He afterwards married again, a widow lady of the name of Massingbird, who had two nearly grown-up sons. She had brought her sons home with her to Verner's Pride, and they had made it their home since.

Mr. Verner kept it no secret that his nephew Lionel was to be his heir; and, as such, Lionel was universally regarded on the estate. "Always provided that you merit it," Mr. Verner would say to Lionel in private; and so he had said to him from the very first. "Be what you ought to be—what I fondly believe my brother Lionel was: a man of goodness, of honour, of Christian integrity; a *gentleman* in the highest acceptance of the term—and Verner's Pride shall undoubtedly be yours. But if I find you forget your fair conduct, and forfeit the esteem of good men, so surely will I leave it away from you."

And that is the introduction. And now we must go back to the golden light of that spring evening.

Ascending the broad flight of steps and crossing the terrace, the house door is entered. A spacious hall, paved with delicately-grained marble, its windows mellowed by the soft tints of stained glass, whose pervading hues are of rose and violet, gives entrance to reception rooms on

either side. Those on the right-hand are mostly reserved for state occasions; those on the left are dedicated to common use. All these rooms are just now empty of living occupants, save one. That one is a small room on the right, behind the two grand drawing-rooms, and it looks out on the side of the house towards the south. It is called "Mr. Verner's study." And there sits Mr. Verner himself in it, leaning back in his chair and reading. A large fire burns in the grate, and he is close to it: he is always chilly.

Ay, always chilly. For Mr. Verner's last illness—at least, what will in all probability prove his ending—has already laid hold of him. One generation passes away after another. It seems but the other day that a last illness seized upon his father, and now it is his turn: but several years have elapsed since then. Mr. Verner is not sixty, and he thinks that is young for the disorder that has fastened on him. It is no hurried disorder; he may live for years yet; but the end, when it does come, will be tolerably sudden: and that he knows. It is water on the chest. He is a little man with light eyes; very much like what his father was before him: but not in the least like his late brother Sir Lionel, who was a very fine and handsome man. He has a mild, pleasing countenance; but there arises a slight scowl to his brow as he turns hastily round at a noisy interruption.

Some one had burst into the room—forgetting, probably, that it was the quiet room of an invalid. A tall, dark young man, with broad shoulders, and a somewhat peculiar stoop in them. His hair was black, his complexion sallow; but his features were good. He might have been called a handsome man, but for a strange, ugly mark upon his cheek. A very strange-looking mark indeed, quite as large as a pigeon's egg, with what looked like radii shooting from it on all sides. Some of the villagers, talking familiarly among themselves, would call it a hedgehog, some would call it a "porkypine;" but it resembled a star as much as anything. That is, if you can imagine a black star. The mark was black as jet; and his pale cheek, and the fact of his possessing no whiskers, made it all the more conspicuous. He was born with the mark; and his mother used to say—but that's of no consequence to us. It was Frederick Massingbird, the present Mrs. Verner's youngest son.

"Roy has come up, sir," said he, addressing Mr. Verner. "He says the Dawsons have turned obstinate and won't go out. They have barricaded the door, and protest that they'll stay, in spite of him. He wishes to know if he shall use force."

"No," said Mr. Verner. "I don't like harsh measures resorted to, and I won't have it done. Roy knows that."

“Well, sir, he waits your orders. He says there’s half the village collected round Dawson’s door. The place is in a regular commotion.”

Mr. Verner looked vexed. Of late years he had declined active management on his estate; and, since he grew ill, he particularly disliked being disturbed with details. “Where’s Lionel?” he asked, in a peevish tone.

“I saw Lionel ride out an hour ago. I don’t know where he is gone.”

“Tell Roy to let the affair rest until to-morrow, when Lionel will see about it. And, Frederick, I wish you would remember that a little noise shakes me: try to come in more quietly. You burst in as if my nerves were as strong as your own.”

Mr. Verner turned to his fire again with an air of relief, glad to have got rid of the trouble in some way, and Frederick Massingbird proceeded to what was called the steward’s room, where Roy waited. This Roy, a hard-looking man with a face very much seamed with the small-pox, was working bailiff to Mr. Verner. Until within a few years, he had been but a labourer on the estate. He was not liked among the poor tenants, and was generally honoured with the appellation “Old Grips,” or “Grip Roy.”

“Roy,” said Frederick Massingbird, “Mr. Verner says it is to be left until to-morrow morning. Mr. Lionel will see about it then. He is out at present.”

“And let the mob have it all their own way for to-night?” returned Roy, angrily. “They be in a state of mutiny, they be; a saying everything as they can lay their tongues to.”

“Let them say it,” responded Frederick Massingbird. “Leave them alone and they’ll disperse quietly enough. I shall not go in to Mr. Verner again, Roy. I caught it now for disturbing him. You must let it rest until you can see Mr. Lionel.”

The bailiff went off, growling. He would have liked to receive *carte blanche* for dealing with the mob—as he was pleased to term them—between whom and himself there was no love lost. As he was crossing a paved yard at the back of the house, some one came hastily out of the laundry in the detached premises to the side, and crossed his path.

A very beautiful girl. Her features were delicate, her complexion was fair as alabaster, with a mantling colour in her cheeks. But for the modest cap upon her head, a stranger might have been puzzled to guess at her condition of life. She looked gentle and refined as any lady, and her manners and speech would not have destroyed the illusion. She may be called a protégée of the house, as will be explained presently; but she acted as maid to Mrs. Verner. The gentle colour in her cheeks flushed somewhat deeper when she saw the bailiff.

He put out his hand and stopped her. "Well, Rachel, how are you?"

"Quite well, thank you," she answered, endeavouring to pass on. But he would not suffer it.

"I say, I want to come to the bottom of this business between you and Luke," he said, lowering his voice. "What's the rights of it?"

"Between me and Luke?" she repeated, turning upon the bailiff an eye that had some scorn in it, and stopping now of her own accord. "There is no business whatever between me and Luke. There never has been. What do you mean?"

"Chut!" cried the bailiff. "Don't I know that he has followed your steps everywhere like a shadder; that he has been ready to kiss the very ground you trod on? And right mad I have been with him for it. You can't deny that he has been after you, wanting you to be his wife."

"I do not wish to deny it," she replied. "You and the whole world are quite welcome to know all that has passed between me and Luke. He asked to be allowed to come here to see me; to 'court' me, he phrased it; which I distinctly declined. Then he took to follow me about. He did not molest me, he was not rude—I do not wish to make it out worse than it was—but it is not pleasant, Mr. Roy, to be followed whenever

you may take a walk, let the distance kept be ever so great. Especially by one you dislike."

"What is there to dislike in Luke?" interrupted the bailiff.

"Perhaps I ought to have said by one you do not like," she resumed. "To like Luke, in the way he wished, was impossible for me, and I told him so from the first. When I found that he followed my steps I spoke to him again, and threatened that, if it were persisted in, I should acquaint Mr. Verner. I told him, once for all, that I could not like him, and never would have him. That is all that has ever passed between me and Luke."

"Well, your hard-heartedness has done for him, Rachel Frost. It has drove him away from his native home, and sent him, a exile, to rough it in foreign lands. You may fix upon one as won't do for you and be your slave as Luke would. He could have kept you well."

"I heard he had gone to London," she remarked.

"London!" returned the bailiff, slightly. "That's only the first halt on the journey. And you have drove him to it!"

"I can't help it," she replied. "I had no natural liking for him, and I could not force it. I don't believe he has gone away for that trifling reason, Mr. Roy. If he has, he must be very foolish."

"Yes, he is foolish," muttered the bailiff to himself as he strode away. "He's a idiot, that's

what he is! and so be all men that loses their wits a sighing after a girl. Vain, deceitful, fickle creatures, the girls be when they're young; but once let them get a hold on you, your ring on their finger, and they turn into vixenish, snarling women! Hags! Luke's a sight best off without her."

Rachel Frost proceeded in-doors. The door of the steward's room stood open, and she turned into it, fancying it was empty. Down on a chair sat she, a marked change coming over her air and manner. Her bright colour had faded, her hands hung down listless; and there was an expression on her face, of care, of perplexity. Suddenly she lifted her hands and struck her temples, with a gesture that looked very like despair.

"What ails you, Rachel?"

The question came from Frederick Massingbird, who had been standing at the window behind the high desk, unobserved by Rachel. Violently startled, she sprang up from her seat, her face a glowing crimson, muttering some disjointed words, to the effect that she did not know anybody was there.

"What were you and Roy discussing so eagerly in the yard?" continued Frederick Massingbird. But the words had scarcely escaped his lips, when the housekeeper, Mrs. Tynn, entered the room. She had a mottled face and mottled arms,

her sleeves just now being turned up to the elbow.

"It was nothing particular, Mr. Frederick," replied Rachel.

"Roy is gone, is he not?" he continued to Rachel.

"Yes, sir."

"Rachel," interposed the housekeeper, "are those things not ready yet, in the laundry?"

"Not quite. In a quarter of an hour, they say."

The housekeeper, with a word of impatience at the laundry's delay, went out and crossed the yard towards it. Frederick Massingbird turned again to Rachel.

"Roy seemed to be grumbling at you."

"He accused me of being the cause of his son's going away. He thinks I ought to have noticed him."

Frederick Massingbird made no reply. He raised his finger and gently rubbed it round and round the mark upon his cheek: a habit he had acquired when a child, and they could not entirely break him off it. He was seven-and-twenty years of age now, but he was sure to begin rubbing that mark unconsciously, if in deep thought. Rachel resumed, her tone a covert one, as if the subject on which she was about to speak, might not be breathed, even to the walls.

"Roy hinted that his son was going to foreign lands. I did not choose to let him see that I knew

anything, so remarked that I had heard he was gone to London. 'London!' he answered: 'that was only the first halting-place on the journey!'"

"Did he give any hint about John?"

"Not a word," replied Rachel. "He would not be likely to do that."

"No. Roy can keep counsel, whatever other virtues he may run short of. Suppose you had joined your fortunes to sighing Luke's, Rachel, and gone out with him to grow rich together?" added Frederick Massingbird, in a tone which could be taken for either jest or earnest.

She evidently took it as the latter, and it appeared to call up an angry spirit. She was vexed almost to tears. Frederick Massingbird detected it.

"Silly Rachel!" he said with a smile. "Do you suppose I should really counsel your throwing yourself away upon Luke Roy?—Rachel," he continued, as the housekeeper again made her appearance, "you must bring up the things as soon as they are ready. My brother is waiting for them."

"I'll bring them up, sir," replied Rachel.

Frederick Massingbird passed through the passages to the hall, and then proceeded upstairs to the bed-room occupied by his brother. A sufficiently spacious room for any ordinary purpose, but which did not look half large enough now for the litter that was in it. Wardrobes and

drawers were standing open, their contents half out, half in; chairs, tables, bed were strewn, and boxes and portmanteaus were gaping open on the floor. John Massingbird, the elder brother, was stowing away some of this litter into the boxes; not all sixes and sevens, like it looked as it lay, but compactly and artistically. John Massingbird possessed a ready hand at packing and arranging; and, therefore, he preferred doing it himself, to deputing it to others. He was one year older than his brother, and there was a great likeness between them in figure and in feature. Not in expression: in that, they were widely different. They were about the same height, and there was the same stoop observable in the shoulders; the features also were similar in cast, and sallow in hue; the same the black eyes and hair. John had large whiskers, otherwise the likeness would have been more striking; and his face was not disfigured by the strange black mark. He was the best looking of the two: his face wore an easy, good-natured, free expression; while Frederick's was cold and reserved. Many people called John Massingbird a handsome man. In character they were widely different. John was a harem-scarem chap, up to every scrape; Fred was cautious and steady as old time.

Seated in the only free chair in the room—free from litter—was a tall, stout lady. But that she

had so much crimson about her, she would have borne a remarkable resemblance to those two young men, her sons. She wore a silk dress, gold in one light, green in another, with broad crimson stripes running across it: her cap was of white lace garnished with crimson ribbons, and her cheeks and nose were crimson to match. As if this were not enough, she wore crimson streamers at her wrists, and a crimson bow to the front of her gown. Had you been outside, you might have seen that the burnished gold on the window-panes had turned to crimson, for the setting sun had changed its hue: but the panes could not look more brightly, deeply crimson, than did Mrs. Verner. It seemed that you might light a match at her face. In that particular, there was a contrast between her, and the perfectly pale, sallow faces of her sons: otherwise the resemblance was great.

"Fred," said Mrs. Verner, "I wish you would see what they are at with the shirts and things. I sent Rachel after them, but she does not come back, and then I sent Mary Tynn, and she does not come. And here's John as impatient as he can be."

She spoke in a slow, somewhat indifferent tone, as if she did not care to put herself out of the way about it. Indeed it was not Mrs. Verner's custom to put herself out of the way for

anything. She liked to eat, drink, and sleep, in undisturbed peace: and she generally did so.

“John’s impatient because he wants to get it over,” spoke up that gentleman himself in a merry voice. “Fifty thousand things I have to do, between now and to-morrow night. If they don’t bring the clothes soon, I shall close the boxes without them, and leave them a legacy for Fred.”

“You have only yourself to thank, John,” said his mother. “You never gave the things out till after breakfast this morning, and then required them to be done by the afternoon. Such nonsense, to say they had grown yellow in the drawers! They’ll be yellower by the time you get there. It is just like you! driving off everything till the last moment. You have known of going some days now.”

John was stamping upon a box to get down the lid, and did not attend to the reproach. “See if it will lock, Fred, will you?” said he.

Frederick Massingbird stooped and essayed to turn the key. And just then Mrs. Tynn entered with a tray of clean linen, which she set down. Rachel followed; a contrivance in her hand, made of silk, for the holding of needles, threads, and pins, all in one.

She looked positively beautiful as she held it out before Mrs. Verner. The evening rays fell upon her exquisite face, with its soft dark eyes and its changing colour; they fell upon her silk

dress, a relic of Mrs. Verner's,—but it had not crimson stripes across it; upon her lace collar, upon the little edge of lace at her wrists. Nature had certainly intended Rachel for a lady, with her graceful form, her charming manners, and her delicate hands.

“Will this do, ma'am?” she inquired. “Is it the sort of thing you meant?”

“Ay, that will do, Rachel,” replied Mrs. Verner. “John, here's a huswife for you!”

“A what?” asked John Massingbird, arresting his stamping.

“A needle book to hold your needles and thread. Rachel has made it nicely. Shan't you want a thimble?”

“Goodness knows,” replied John. “That's it, Fred! that's it! Give it a turn.”

Frederick Massingbird locked the box, and then left the room. His mother followed him, telling John she had a large steel thimble somewhere, and would try and find it for him. Rachel began filling the huswife with needles, and John went on with his packing.

“Halloa!” he presently exclaimed. And Rachel looked up.

“What's the matter, sir?”

“I have pulled one of the strings off this green case. You must sew it on again, Rachel.”

He brought a piece of green baize to her and a broken string. It looked something like the cover