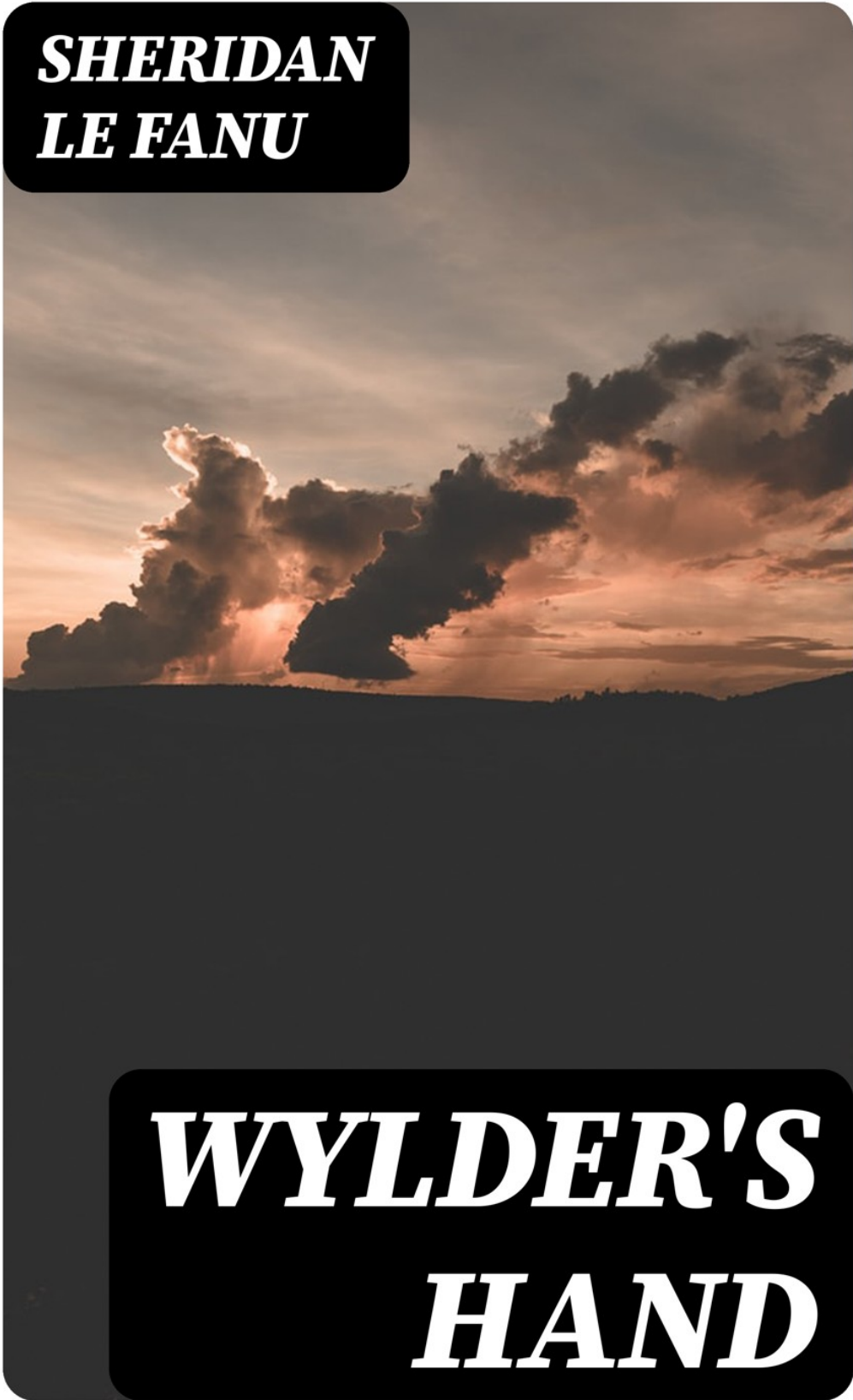


***SHERIDAN
LE FANU***



***WYLDER'S
HAND***

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Sheridan Le Fanu

Wylder's Hand

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Chapter I

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RELATING HOW I DROVE THROUGH THE VILLAGE OF GYLINGDEN WITH MARK WYLDER'S LETTER IN MY VALISE.

It was late in the autumn, and I was skimming along, through a rich English county, in a postchaise, among tall hedgerows gilded, like all the landscape, with the slanting beams of sunset. The road makes a long and easy descent into the little town of Gylingden, and down this we were going at an exhilarating pace, and the jingle of the vehicle sounded like sledge-bells in my ears, and its swaying and jerking were pleasant and life-like. I fancy I was in one of those moods which, under similar circumstances, I sometimes experience still—a semi-narcotic excitement, silent but delightful.

An undulating landscape, with a homely farmstead here and there, and plenty of old English timber scattered grandly over it, extended mistily to my right; on the left the road is overtopped by masses of noble forest. The old park of Brandon lies there, more than four miles from end to end. These masses of solemn and discoloured verdure, the faint but splendid lights, and long filmy shadows, the slopes and hollows—my eyes wandered over them all with that strange sense of unreality, and that mingling of sweet and bitter fancy, with which we revisit a scene familiar in very remote and early childhood, and which has haunted a long interval of maturity and absence, like a romantic reverie.

As I looked through the chaise-windows, every moment presented some group, or outline, or homely object, for

years forgotten; and now, with a strange surprise how vividly remembered and how affectionately greeted! We drove by the small old house at the left, with its double gable and pretty grass garden, and trim yews and modern lilacs and laburnums, backed by the grand timber of the park. It was the parsonage, and old bachelor Doctor Crewe, the rector, in my nonage, still stood, in memory, at the door, in his black shorts and gaiters, with his hands in his pockets, and a puckered smile on his hard ruddy countenance, as I approached. He smiled little on others I believe, but always kindly upon me. This general liking for children and instinct of smiling on them is one source of the delightful illusions which make the remembrance of early days so like a dream of Paradise, and give us, at starting, such false notions of our value.

There was a little fair-haired child playing on the ground before the steps as I whirled by. The old rector had long passed away; the shorts, gaiters, and smile—a phantom; and nature, who had gathered in the past, was providing for the future.

The pretty mill-road, running up through Redman's Dell, dank and dark with tall romantic trees, was left behind in another moment; and we were now traversing the homely and antique street of the little town, with its queer shops and solid steep-roofed residences. Up Church-street I contrived a peep at the old gray tower where the chimes hung; and as we turned the corner a glance at the 'Brandon Arms.' How very small and low that palatial hostelry of my earlier recollections had grown! There were new faces at the door. It was only two-and-twenty years ago, and I was then

but eleven years old. A retrospect of a score of years or so, at three-and-thirty, is a much vaster affair than a much longer one at fifty.

The whole thing seemed like yesterday; and as I write, I open my eyes and start and cry, 'can it be twenty, five-and-twenty, aye, by Jove! five-and-thirty, years since then?' How my days have flown! And I think when another such yesterday shall have arrived, where shall I be?

The first ten years of my life were longer than all the rest put together, and I think would continue to be so were my future extended to an ante-Noachian span. It is the first ten that emerge from nothing, and commencing in a point, it is during them that consciousness, memory—all the faculties grow, and the experience of sense is so novel, crowded, and astounding. It is this beginning at a point, and expanding to the immense disk of our present range of sensuous experience, that gives to them so prodigious an illusory perspective, and makes us in childhood, measuring futurity by them, form so wild and exaggerated an estimate of the duration of human life. But, I beg your pardon.

My journey was from London. When I had reached my lodgings, after my little excursion up the Rhine, upon my table there lay, among the rest, one letter—there generally *is* in an overdue bundle—which I viewed with suspicion. I could not in the least tell why. It was a broad-faced letter, of bluish complexion, and had made inquisition after me in the country—had asked for me at Queen's Folkstone; and, *vised* by my cousin, had presented itself at the Friars, in Shropshire, and thence proceeded by Sir Harry's direction (there was the autograph) to Nolton Hall; thence again to

Ilchester, whence my fiery and decisive old aunt sent it straight back to my cousin, with a whisk of her pen which seemed to say, 'How the plague can I tell where the puppy is?—'tis your business, Sir, not mine, to find him out!' And so my cousin despatched it to my head-quarters in town, where from the table it looked up in my face, with a broad red seal, and a countenance scarred and marred all over with various post-marks, erasures, and transverse directions, the scars and furrows of disappointment and adventure.

It had not a good countenance, somehow. The original lines were not prepossessing. The handwriting I knew as one sometimes knows a face, without being able to remember who the plague it belongs to; but, still, with an unpleasant association about it. I examined it carefully, and laid it down unopened. I went through half-a-dozen others, and recurred to it, and puzzled over its exterior again, and again postponed what I fancied would prove a disagreeable discovery; and this happened every now and again, until I had quite exhausted my budget, and then I did open it, and looked straight to the signature.

'Pooh! Mark Wylder,' I exclaimed, a good deal relieved.

Mark Wylder! Yes, Master Mark could not hurt *me*. There was nothing about him to excite the least uneasiness; on the contrary, I believe he liked me as well as he was capable of liking anybody, and it was now seven years since we had met.

I have often since thought upon the odd sensation with which I hesitated over his unopened letter; and now, remembering how the breaking of that seal resembled, in

my life, the breaking open of a portal through which I entered a labyrinth, or rather a catacomb, where for many days I groped and stumbled, looking for light, and was, in a manner, lost, hearing strange sounds, witnessing imperfectly strange sights, and, at last, arriving at a dreadful chamber—a sad sort of superstition steals over me.

I had then been his working junior in the cause of Wylder v. Trustees of Brandon, minor—Dorcas Brandon, his own cousin. There was a complicated cousinship among these Brandons, Wylders, and Lakes—inextricable intermarriages, which, five years ago, before I renounced the bar, I had at my fingers' ends, but which had now relapsed into haze. There must have been some damnable taint in the blood of the common ancestor—a spice of the insane and the diabolical. They were an ill-conditioned race—that is to say, every now and then there emerged a miscreant, with a pretty evident vein of madness. There was Sir Jonathan Brandon, for instance, who ran his own nephew through the lungs in a duel fought in a paroxysm of Cencian jealousy; and afterwards shot his coachman dead upon the box through his coach-window, and finally died in Vienna, whither he had absconded, of a pike-thrust received from a sentry in a brawl.

The Wylders had not much to boast of, even in contrast with that wicked line. They had produced their madmen and villains, too; and there had been frequent intermarriages—not very often happy. There had been many lawsuits, frequent disinheritings, and even worse doings. The Wylders of Brandon appear very early in history; and the Wylder arms, with their legend, 'resurgam,' stands in bold relief

over the great door of Brandon Hall. So there were Wylders of Brandon, and Brandons of Brandon. In one generation, a Wylder ill-using his wife and hating his children, would cut them all off, and send the estate bounding back again to the Brandons. The next generation or two would amuse themselves with a lawsuit, until the old Brandon type reappeared in some bachelor brother or uncle, with a Jezebel on his left hand, and an attorney on his right, and, presto! the estates were back again with the Wylders.

A 'statement of title' is usually a dry affair. But that of the dynasty of Brandon Hall was a truculent romance. Their very 'wills' were spiced with the devilment of the 'testators,' and abounded in insinuations and even language which were scandalous.

Here is Mark Wylder's letter:—

'DEAR CHARLES—Of course you have heard of my good luck, and how kind poor Dickie—from whom I never expected anything—proved at last. It was a great windfall for a poor devil like me; but, after all, it was only right, for it ought never to have been his at all. I went down and took possession on the 4th, the tenants very glad, and so they might well be; for, between ourselves, Dickie, poor fellow, was not always pleasant to deal with. He let the roof all out of repair, and committed waste beside in timber he had no right to in life, as I am told; but that don't signify much, only the house will cost me a pretty penny to get it into order and furnish. The rental is five thousand a-year and some hundreds, and the rents can be got up a bit—so Larkin tells me. Do you know anything of him? He says he did business for your uncle once. He seems a clever fellow—a bit too

clever, perhaps—and was too much master here, I suspect, in poor Dickie's reign. Tell me all you can make out about him. It is a long time since I saw you, Charles; I'm grown brown, and great whiskers. I met poor Dominick—what an ass that chap is—but he did not know me till I introduced myself, so I must be a good deal changed. Our ship was at Malta when I got the letter. I was sick of the service, and no wonder: a lieutenant—and there likely to stick all my days. Six months, last year, on the African coast, watching slavers—think of that! I had a long yarn from the viscount—advice, and that sort of thing. I do not think he is a year older than I, but takes airs because he's a trustee. But I only laugh at trifles that would have riled me once. So I wrote him a yarn in return, and drew it uncommon mild. And he has been useful to me; and I think matters are pretty well arranged to disappoint the kind intention of good Uncle Wylder—the brute; he hated my father, but that was no reason to persecute me, and I but an infant, almost, when he died, d—him. Well, you know he left Brandon with some charges to my Cousin Dorcas. She is a superbly fine girl. Our ship was at Naples when she was there two years ago; and I saw a good deal of her. Of course it was not to be thought of then; but matters are quite different, you know, now, and the viscount, who is a very sensible fellow in the main, saw it at once. You see, the old brute meant to leave her a life estate; but it does not amount to that, though it won't benefit me, for he settled that when I die it shall go to his right heirs—that will be to my son, if I ever have one. So Miss Dorcas must pack, and turn out whenever I die, that is, if I slip my cable first. Larkin told me this—and I took an opinion—and

found it is so; and the viscount seeing it, agreed the best thing for her as well as me would be, we should marry. She is a wide-awake young lady, and nothing the worse for that: I'm a bit that way myself. And so very little courtship has sufficed. She is a splendid beauty, and when you see her you'll say any fellow might be proud of such a bride; and so I am. And now, dear Charlie, you have it all. It will take place somewhere about the twenty-fourth of next month; and you must come down by the first, if you can. Don't disappoint. I want you for best man, maybe; and besides, I would like to talk to you about some things they want me to do in the settlements, and you were always a long-headed fellow: so pray don't refuse.

'Dear Charlie, ever most sincerely,

'Your old Friend,

'MARK WYLDER.

'P.S.—I stay at the Brandon Arms in the town, until after the marriage; and then you can have a room at the Hall, and capital shooting when we return, which will be in a fortnight after.'

I can't say that Wylder was an old *friend*. But he was certainly one of the oldest and most intimate acquaintances I had. We had been for nearly three years at school together; and when his ship came to England, met frequently; and twice, when he was on leave, we had been for months together under the same roof; and had for some years kept up a regular correspondence, which first grew desultory, and finally, as manhood supervened, died out. The plain truth is, I did not *very* much like him.

Then there was that beautiful apathetic Dorcas Brandon. Where is the laggard so dull as to experience no pleasing flutter at his heart in anticipation of meeting a perfect beauty in a country house. I was romantic, like every other youngish fellow who is not a premature curmudgeon; and there was something indefinitely pleasant in the consciousness that, although a betrothed bride, the young lady still was fancy free: not a bit in love. It was but a marriage of convenience, with mitigations. And so there hovered in my curiosity some little flicker of egotistic romance, which helped to rouse my spirits, and spur me on to action.

Chapter II

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IN WHICH I ENTER THE DRAWING-ROOM.

I was now approaching Brandon Hall; less than ten minutes more would set me down at its door-steps. The stiff figure of Mrs. Marston, the old housekeeper, pale and austere, in rustling black silk (she was accounted a miser, and estimated to have saved I dare not say how much money in the Wylder family—kind to me with the bread-and-jam and Naples-biscuit-kindness of her species, in old times)—stood in fancy at the doorway. She, too, was a dream, and, I dare say, her money spent by this time. And that other dream, to which she often led me, with the large hazel eyes, and clear delicate tints—so sweet, so *riante*, yet so sad; poor Lady Mary Brandon, dying there—so unhappily mated—a young mother, and her baby sleeping in long 'Broderie Anglaise' attire upon the pillow on the sofa, and whom she used to show me with a peeping mystery, and her finger to her smiling lip, and a gaiety and fondness in her pretty face. That little helpless, groping, wailing creature was now the Dorcas Brandon, the mistress of the grand old mansion and all its surroundings, who was the heroine of the splendid matrimonial compromise which was about to reconcile a feud, and avert a possible lawsuit, and, for one generation, at least, to tranquillise the troubled annals of the Brandons and Wylders.

And now the ancient gray chapel, with its stained window, and store of old Brandon and Wylder monuments among its solemn clump of elm-trees, flitted by on my right;

and in a moment more we drew up at the great gate on the left; not a hundred yards removed from it, and with an eager recognition, I gazed on the noble front of the old manorial house.

Up the broad straight avenue with its solemn files of gigantic timber towering at the right and the left hand, the chaise rolled smoothly, and through the fantastic iron gate of the courtyard, and with a fine swinging sweep and a jerk, we drew up handsomely before the door-steps, with the Wylder arms in bold and florid projection carved above it.

The sun had just gone down. The blue shadows of twilight overcast the landscape, and the mists of night were already stealing like thin smoke among the trunks and roots of the trees. Through the stone mullions of the projecting window at the right, a flush of fire-light looked pleasant and hospitable, and on the threshold were standing Lord Chelford and my old friend Mark Wylder; a faint perfume of the mildest cheroot declared how they had been employed.

So I jumped to the ground and was greeted very kindly by the smokers.

'I'm here, you know, *in loco parentis*;—my mother and I keep watch and ward. We allow Wylder, you see, to come every day to his devotions. But you are not to go to the Brandon Arms—you got my note, didn't you?'

I had, and had come direct to the Hall in consequence.

I looked over the door. Yes, my memory had served me right. There were the Brandon arms, and the Brandon quartered with the Wylder; but the Wylder coat in the centre, with the grinning griffins for supporters, and flaunting scrolls all round, and the ominous word 'resurgam'

underneath, proclaimed itself sadly and vauntingly over the great entrance. I often wonder how the Wylder coat came in the centre; who built the old house—a Brandon or a Wylder; and if a Wylder, why was it Brandon Hall?

Dusty and seedy somewhat, as men are after a journey, I chatted with Mark and the noble peer for a few minutes at the door, while my valise and *et ceteras* were lifted in and hurried up the stairs to my room, whither I followed them.

While I was at my toilet, in came Mark Wylder laughing, as was his wont, and very unceremoniously he took possession of my easy-chair, and threw his leg over the arm of it.

'I'm glad you're come, Charlie; you were always a good fellow, and I really want a hand here confoundedly. I think it will all do very nicely; but, of course, there's a lot of things to be arranged—settlements, you know—and I can't make head or tail of their lingo, and a fellow don't like to sign and seal hand over head—*you* would not advise that, you know; and Chelford is a very good fellow, of course, and all that—but he's taking care of Dorcas, you see; and I might be left in the lurch.'

'It is a better way, at all events, Mark, than Wylder *versus* Trustees of Brandon, minor,' said I.

'Well, things do turn out very oddly; don't they?' said Mark with a sly glance of complacency, and his hands in his pockets. 'But I know you'll hold the tiller till I get through; hang me if I know the soundings, or where I'm going; and you have the chart by heart, Charlie.'

'I'm afraid you'll find me by no means so well up now as six years ago in "Wylder and Brandon;" but surely you have

your lawyer, Mr. Larkin, haven't you?'

'To be sure—that's exactly it—he's Dorcas's agent. I don't know anything about him, and I do know you—don't you see? A fellow doesn't want to put himself into the hands of a stranger altogether, especially a lawyer, ha, ha! it wouldn't pay.'

I did not half like the equivocal office which my friend Mark had prepared for me. If family squabbles were to arise, I had no fancy to mix in them; and I did not want a collision with Mr. Larkin either; and, on the whole, notwithstanding his modesty, I thought Wylder very well able to take care of himself. There was time enough, however, to settle the point. So by this time, being splendid in French boots and white vest, and altogether perfect and refreshed, I emerged from my dressing-room, Wylder by my side.

We had to get along a dim oak-panelled passage, and into a sort of *oeil-de-boeuf*, with a lantern light above, from which diverged two other solemn corridors, and a short puzzling turn or two brought us to the head of the upper stairs. For I being a bachelor, and treated accordingly, was airily perched on the third storey.

To my mind, there is something indescribably satisfactory in the intense solidity of those old stairs and floors—no spring in the planks, not a creak; you walk as over strata of stone. What clumsy grandeur! What Cyclopean carpenters! What a prodigality of oak!

It was dark by this time, and the drawing-room, a vast and grand chamber, with no light but the fire and a pair of dim soft lamps near the sofas and ottomans, lofty, and glowing with rich tapestry curtains and pictures, and

mirrors, and carved oak, and marble—was already tenanted by the ladies.

Old Lady Chelford, stiff and rich, a Vandyke dowager, with a general effect of deep lace, funereal velvet, and pearls; and pale, with dreary eyes, and thin high nose, sat in a high-backed carved oak throne, with red cushions. To her I was first presented, and cursorily scrutinised with a stately old-fashioned insolence, as if I were a candidate footman, and so dismissed. On a low seat, chatting to her as I came up, was a very handsome and rather singular-looking girl, fair, with a light golden-tinted hair; and a countenance, though then grave enough, instinct with a certain promise of animation and spirit not to be mistaken. Could this be the heroine of the pending alliance? No; I was mistaken. A third lady, at what would have been an ordinary room's length away, half reclining on an ottoman, was now approached by Wylder, who presented me to Miss Brandon.

'Dorcas, this is my old friend, Charles de Cresseron. You have often heard me speak of him; and I want you to shake hands and make his acquaintance, and draw him out—do you see; for he's a shy youth, and must be encouraged.'

He gave me a cheerful slap on the shoulder as he uttered this agreeable bit of banter, and altogether disconcerted me confoundedly. Wylder's dress-coats always smelt of tobacco, and his talk of tar. I was quietly incensed and disgusted; for in those days I *was* a little shy.

The lady rose, in a soft floating way; tall, black-haired—but a blackness with a dull rich shadow through it. I had only a general impression of large dusky eyes and very exquisite features—more delicate than the Grecian models, and with

a wonderful transparency, like tinted marble; and a superb haughtiness, quite unaffected. She held forth her hand, which I did little more than touch. There was a peculiarity in her greeting, which I felt a little overawing, without exactly discovering in what it consisted; and it was I think that she did not smile. She never took that trouble for form's sake, like other women.

So, as Wylder had set a chair for me I could not avoid sitting upon it, though I should much have preferred standing, after the manner of men, and retaining my liberty.

Chapter III

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OUR DINNER PARTY AT BRANDON.

I was curious. I had heard a great deal of her beauty; and it had exceeded all I heard; so I talked my sublimest and brightest chit-chat, in my most musical tones, and was rather engaging and amusing, I ventured to hope. But the best man cannot manage a dialogue alone. Miss Brandon was plainly not a person to make any sort of exertion towards what is termed keeping up a conversation; at all events she did not, and after a while the present one got into a decidedly sinking condition. An acquiescence, a faint expression of surprise, a fainter smile—she contributed little more, after the first few questions of courtesy had been asked, in her low silvery tones, and answered by me. To me the natural demise of a *tête-à-tête* discourse has always seemed a disgrace. But this apathetic beauty had either more moral courage or more stupidity than I, and was plainly terribly indifferent about the catastrophe. I've sometimes thought my struggles and sinkings amused her cruel serenity.

Bella ma stupida!—I experienced, at last, the sort of pique with which George Sand's hero apostrophises *la dernière Aldini*. Yet I could not think her stupid. The universal instinct honours beauty. It is so difficult to believe it either dull or base. In virtue of some mysterious harmonies it is 'the image of God,' and must, we feel, enclose the God-like; so I suppose I felt, for though I wished to think her stupid, I could not. She was not exactly languid,

but a grave and listless beauty, and a splendid beauty for all that.

I told her my early recollections of Brandon and Gylingden, and how I remembered her a baby, and said some graceful trifles on that theme, which I fancied were likely to please. But they were only received, and led to nothing. In a little while in comes Lord Chelford, always natural and pleasant, and quite unconscious of his peerage—he was above it, I think—and chatted away merrily with that handsome animated blonde—who on earth, could she be?—and did not seem the least chilled in the stiff and frosted presence of his mother, but was genial and playful even with that Spirit of the Frozen Ocean, who received his affectionate trifling with a sort of smiling, though wintry pride and complacency, reflecting back from her icy aspects something of the rosy tints of that kindly sunshine.

I thought I heard him call the young lady Miss Lake, and there rose before me an image of an old General Lake, and a dim recollection of some reverse of fortune. He was—I was sure of that—connected with the Brandon family; and was, with the usual fatality, a bit of a *mauvais sujet*. He had made away with his children's money, or squandered his own; or somehow or another impoverished his family not creditably. So I glanced at her, and Miss Brandon divined, it seemed, what was passing in my mind, for she said:—

'That is my cousin, Miss Lake, and I think her very beautiful—don't you?'

'Yes, she certainly is very handsome,' and I was going to say something about her animation and spirit, but remembered just in time, that that line of eulogy would

hardly have involved a compliment to Miss Brandon. 'I know her brother, a little—that is, Captain Lake—Stanley Lake; he's her brother, I fancy?'

Oh? said the young lady, in that tone which is pointed with an unknown accent, between a note of enquiry and of surprise. 'Yes; he's her brother.'

And she paused; as if something more were expected. But at that moment the bland tones of Larcom, the solemn butler, announced the Rev. William Wylder and Mrs. Wylder, and I said—

'William is an old college friend of mine;' and I observed him, as he entered with an affectionate and sad sort of interest. Eight years had passed since we met last, and that is something at any time. It had thinned my simple friend's hair a little, and his face, too, was more careworn than I liked, but his earnest, sweet smile was there still. Slight, gentle, with something of a pale and studious refinement in his face. The same gentle voice, with that slight, occasional hesitation, which somehow I liked. There is always a little shock after an absence of some years before identities adjust themselves, and then we find the change is not, after all, so very great. I suspect it is, rather, that something of the old picture is obliterated, in that little interval, to return no more. And so William Wylder was vicar now instead of that straight wiry cleric of the mulberry face and black leggings.

And who was this little Mrs. William Wylder who came in, so homely of feature, so radiant of goodhumour, so eager and simple, in a very plain dress—a Brandon housemaid would not have been seen in it, leaning so pleasantly on his

lean, long, clerical arm—made for reaching books down from high shelves, a lank, scholarlike limb, with a somewhat threadbare cuff—and who looked round with that anticipation of pleasure, and that simple confidence in a real welcome, which are so likely to insure it? Was she an helpmeet for a black-letter man, who talked with the Fathers in his daily walks, could extemporise Latin hexameters, and dream in Greek. Was she very wise, or at all learned? I think her knowledge lay chiefly in the matters of poultry, and puddings, and latterly, of the nursery, where one treasure lay—that golden-haired little boy, four years old, whom I had seen playing among the roses before the parsonage door, asleep by this time—half-past seven, 'precise,' as old Lady Chelford loved to write on her summons to dinner.

When the vicar, I dare say, in a very odd, quaint way, made his proposal of marriage, moved thereto assuredly, neither by fortune, nor by beauty, to good, merry, little Miss Dorothy Chubley, whom nobody was supposed to be looking after, and the town had, somehow, set down from the first as a natural-born old maid—there was a very general amazement; some disappointment here and there, with customary sneers and compassion, and a good deal of genuine amusement not ill-natured.

Miss Chubley, all the shopkeepers in the town knew and liked, and, in a way, respected her, as 'Miss Dolly.' Old Reverend John Chubley, D.D., who had been in love with his wife from the period of his boyhood; and yet so grudging was Fate, had to undergo an engagement of nigh thirty years before Hymen rewarded their constancy; being at length made Vicar of Huddelston, and master of church

revenues to the amount of three hundred pounds a year—had, at forty-five, married his early love, now forty-two.

They had never grown old in one another's fond eyes. Their fidelity was of the days of chivalry, and their simplicity comical and beautiful. Twenty years of happy and loving life were allotted them and one pledge—poor Miss Dorothy—was left alone, when little more than nineteen years old. This good old couple, having loved early and waited long, and lived together with wonderful tenderness and gaiety of heart their allotted span, bid farewell for a little while—the gentle little lady going first, and, in about two years more, the good rector following.

I remembered him, but more dimly than his merry little wife, though she went first. She made raisin-wine, and those curious biscuits that tasted of Windsor soap.

And this Mrs. William Wylder just announced by soft-toned Larcom, is the daughter (there is no mistaking the jolly smile and lumpy odd little features, and radiance of amiability) of the good doctor and Mrs. Chubley, so curiously blended in her loving face. And last comes in old Major Jackson, smiling largely, squaring himself, and doing his courtesies in a firm but florid military style, and plainly pleased to find himself in good company and on the eve of a good dinner. And so our dinner-list is full.

The party were just nine—and it is wonderful what a row nine well-behaved people will contrive to make at a dinner-table. The inferior animals—as we see them caged and cared for, and fed at one o'clock, 'precise,' in those public institutions provided for their maintenance—confine their uproar to the period immediately antecedent to their meal,

and perform the actual process of deglutition with silent attention, and only such suckings, lappings, and crunchings, as illustrate their industry and content. It is the distinctive privilege of man to exert his voice during his repast, and to indulge also in those specially human cachinnations which no lower creature, except that disreputable Australian biped known as the 'laughing jackass,' presumes to imitate; and to these vocal exercises of the feasters respond the endless ring and tinkle of knife and fork on china plate, and the ministering angels in white chokers behind the chairs, those murmured solicitations which hum round and round the ears of the revellers.

Of course, when great guns are present, and people talk *pro bono publico*, one at a time, with parliamentary regularity, things are different; but at an ordinary symposium, when the garrulous and diffident make merry together, and people break into twos or threes and talk across the table, or into their neighbours' ears, and all together, the noise is not only exhilarating and peculiar, but sometimes perfectly unaccountable.

The talk, of course, has its paroxysms and its subsidences. I have once or twice found myself on a sudden in total silence in the middle of a somewhat prolix, though humorous story, commenced in an uproar for the sole recreation of my pretty neighbour, and ended—patched up, *renounced*—a faltering failure, under the converging gaze of a sternly attentive audience.

On the other hand, there are moments when the uproar whirls up in a crescendo to a pitch and volume perfectly amazing; and at such times, I believe that anyone might say

anything to the reveller at his elbow, without the smallest risk of being overheard by mortal. You may plan with young Caesar Borgia, on your left, the poisoning of your host; or ask pretty Mrs. Fusible, on your right, to elope with you from her grinning and gabbling lord, whose bald head flashes red with champagne only at the other side of the table. There is no privacy like it; you may plot your wickedness, or make your confession, or pop the question, and not a soul but your confidant be a bit the wiser—provided only you command your countenance.

I don't know how it happened, but Wylder sat beside Miss Lake. I fancied he ought to have been differently placed, but Miss Brandon did not seem conscious of his absence, and it seemed to me that the handsome blonde would have been as well pleased if he had been anywhere but where he was. There was no look of liking, though some faint glimmerings both of annoyance and embarrassment in her face. But in Wylder's I saw a sort of conceited consciousness, and a certain eagerness, too, while he talked; though a shrewd fellow in many ways, he had a secret conviction that no woman could resist him.

'I suppose the world thinks me a very happy fellow, Miss Lake?' he said, with a rather pensive glance of enquiry into that young lady's eyes, as he set down his hock-glass.

'I'm afraid it's a selfish world, Mr. Wylder, and thinks very little of what does not concern it.'

'Now, *you*, I dare say,' continued Wylder, not caring to perceive the *soupçon* of sarcasm that modulated her answer so musically, 'look upon me as a very fortunate fellow?'

'You are a very fortunate person, Mr. Wylder; a gentleman of very moderate abilities, with no prospects, and without fortune, who finds himself, without any deservings of his own, on a sudden, possessed of an estate, and about to be united to the most beautiful heiress in England, *is*, I think, rather a fortunate person.'

'You did not always think me so stupid, Miss Lake,' said Mr. Wylder, showing something of the hectic of vexation.

'Stupid! did I say? Well, you know, we learn by experience, Mr. Wylder. One's judgment matures, and we are harder to please—don't you think so?—as we grow older.'

'Aye, so we are, I dare say; at any rate, some things don't please us as we calculated. I remember when this bit of luck would have made me a devilish happy fellow—*twice* as happy; but, you see, if a fellow hasn't his liberty, where's the good of money? I don't know how I got into it, but I can't get away now; and the lawyer fellows, and trustees, and all that sort of prudent people, get about one, and persuade, and exhort, and they bully you, by Jove! into what they call a marriage of convenience—I forget the French word—you know; and then, you see, your feelings may be very different, and all that; and where's the good of money, I say, if you can't enjoy it?'

And Mr. Wylder looked poetically unhappy, and trundled over a little bit of fricandeau on his plate with his fork, desolately, as though earthly things had lost their relish.

'Yes; I think I know the feeling,' said Miss Lake, quietly. 'That ballad, you know, expresses it very prettily:—"Oh, thou hast been the cause of this anguish, my mother?"'

It was not then as old a song as it is now.

Wylder looked sharply at her, but she did not smile, and seemed to speak in good faith; and being somewhat thick in some matters, though a cunning fellow, he said—

'Yes; that is the sort of thing, you know—of course, with a difference—a girl is supposed to speak there; but men suffer that way, too—though, of course, very likely it's more their own fault.'

'It is very sad,' said Miss Lake, who was busy with a *pâté*.

'She has no life in her; she's a mere figurehead; she's awfully slow; I don't like black hair; I'm taken by conversation—and all that. There are some men that can only really love once in their lives, and never forget their first love, I assure you.'

Wylder murmured all this, and looked as plaintive as he could without exciting the attention of the people over-the-way.

Mark Wylder had, as you perceive, rather vague notions of decency, and not much experience of ladies; and thought he was making just the interesting impression he meditated. He was a good deal surprised, then, when Miss Lake said, and with quite a cheerful countenance, and very quickly, but so that her words stung his ear like the prick of a bodkin.

'Your way of speaking of my cousin, Sir, is in the highest degree discreditable to you and offensive to me, and should you venture to repeat it, I will certainly mention it to Lady Chelford.'

And so she turned to old Major Jackson at her right, who had been expounding a point of the battle of Vittoria to Lord Chelford; and she led him again into action, and acquired