

***ARCHIBALD
MARSHALL***

***ABINGTON
ABBAY***

NO ENTRY
WITHOUT
TICKET

Archibald Marshall

Abington Abbey

A Novel

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CHAPTER I

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THE VERY HOUSE

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"I believe I've got the very house, Cara."

"Have you, darling? It's the fifty-third."

"Ah, but you wait till you see. Abington Abbey. What do you think of that for a name? Just come into the market. There are cloisters, and a chapel. Stew ponds. A yew walk. Three thousand acres, and a good head of game. More can be had by arrangement, and we'll arrange it. Presentation to living. We'll make Bunting a parson, and present him to it. Oh, it's the very thing. I haven't told you half. Come and have a look at it."

George Grafton spread out papers and photographs on a table. His daughter, Caroline, roused herself from her book and her easy chair in front of the fire to come and look at them. He put his arm around her slim waist and gave her a kiss, which she returned with a smile. "Darling old George," she said, settling his tie more to her liking, "I sometimes wish you weren't quite so young. You let yourself in for so many disappointments."

George Grafton did look rather younger than his fifty years, in spite of his grey hair. He had a fresh complexion and a pair of dark, amused, alert eyes. His figure was that of a young man, and his daughter had only settled his tie out of affection, for it and the rest of his clothes were perfect, with that perfection which comes from Bond Street and

Savile Row, the expenditure of considerable sums of money, and exact knowledge and taste in such matters. He was, in fact, as agreeable to the eye as any man of his age could be, unless you were to demand evidences of unusual intellectual power, which he hadn't got, and did very well without.

As for his eldest daughter Caroline, her appeal to the eye needed no qualification whatever, for she had, in addition to her attractions of feature and colouring, that adorable gift of youth, which, in the case of some fortunate beings, seems to emanate grace. It was so with her. At the age of twenty there might have been some doubt as to whether she could be called beautiful or only very pretty, and the doubt would not be resolved for some few years to come. She had delicate, regular features, sweet eyes, a kind smiling mouth, a peach-like soft-tinted skin, nut-coloured hair with a wave in it, a slender column of a neck, with deliciously modulated curves of breast and shoulders. She looked thorough-bred, was fine at the extremities, clean-boned and long in the flank, and moved with natural grace and freedom. Half of these qualities belonged to her youth, which was so living and palpitating in her as to be a quality of beauty in itself.

She was charmingly dressed, and her clothes, like her father's, meant money, as well as perfect taste; or perhaps, rather, taste perfectly aware of the needs and fashions of the moment. They were both of them people of the sort whom wealth adorns, who are physically perfected and mentally expanded by it: whom it is a pleasure to think of as rich. The room in which we first meet them gave the same sense of satisfaction as their clothes and general air of

prosperity, and expressed them in the same way. It was a large room, half library, half morning-room. There was a dark carpet, deep chairs and sofas covered with bright chintzes, many books, pictures, flowers, some ornaments of beauty and value, but few that were not also for use, all the expensive accessories of the mechanism of life in silver, tortoise-shell, morocco. It was as quiet and homelike as if it had been in the heart of the country, though it was actually in the heart of London. A great fire of logs leapt and glowed in the open hearth, the numerous electric globes were reduced in their main effect to a warm glow, though they gave their light just at the points at which it was wanted. It was a delightful room for ease of mind and ease of body—or for family life, which was a state of being enjoyed and appreciated by the fortunate family which inhabited it.

There were five of them, without counting the Dragon, who yet counted for a great deal. George Grafton was a banker, by inheritance and to some extent by acquirement. His business cares sat lightly on him, and interfered in no way with his pleasures. But he liked his work, as he liked most of the things that he did, and was clever at it. He spent a good many days in the year shooting and playing golf, and went away for long holidays, generally with his family. But his enjoyments were enhanced by not being made the business of his life, and his business was almost an enjoyment in itself. It was certainly an interest, and one that he would not have been without.

He had married young, and his wife had died at the birth of his only son, fifteen years before. He had missed her greatly, which had prevented him from marrying again when

his children were all small; and now they were grown up, or growing up, their companionship was enough for him. But he still missed her, and her memory was kept alive among his children, only the eldest of whom, however, had any clear recollection of her.

Beatrix, the second girl, was eighteen, Barbara, the third, sixteen. Young George, commonly known as Bunting in this family of nicknames, was fourteen. He was now enjoying himself excessively at Eton, would presently enjoy himself equally at Cambridge, and in due time would be introduced to his life work at the bank, under circumstances which would enable him to enjoy himself just as much as ever, and with hardly less time at his disposal than the fortunate young men among his contemporaries whose opportunities for so doing came from wealth inherited and not acquired. Or if he chose to take up a profession, which in his case could only be that of arms, he might do so, with his future comfort assured, the only difference being that he could not expect to be quite so rich.

This is business on the higher scale as it is understood and for the most part practised in England, that country where life is more than money, and money, although it is a large factor in gaining prizes sought for, is not the only one. It may be necessary to 'go right through the mill' for those who have to make their own way entirely, though it is difficult to see how the purposes of high finance can be better served by some one who knows how to sweep out an office floor than by some one who has left that duty to a charwoman. The mysteries of a copying-press are not beyond the power of a person of ordinary intelligence to

learn in a few minutes, and sticking stamps on letters is an art which has been mastered by most people in early youth. If it has not, it may be safely left to subordinates. George Grafton was as well dressed as any man in London, but he had probably never brushed or folded his own clothes. Nor had he served behind the counter of his own bank, nor often filled up with his own hand the numerous documents which he so effectively signed.

It is to be supposed that the pure mechanism of business, which is not, after all, more difficult to master than the mechanism of Latin prose, is not the only thing sought to be learnt in this vaunted going through of the mill. But it is doubtful whether the young Englishman who is introduced for the first time into a family business at the age of twenty-two or three, and has had the ordinary experience of public school and university life, is not at least as capable of judging and dealing with men as his less fortunate fellow who has spent his youth and early manhood doing the work of a clerk. His opportunities, at least, have been wider of knowing them, and he has had his training in obedience and discipline, and, if he has made use of his opportunities, in responsibility. At any rate, many of the old-established firms of world-wide reputation in the City of London are directed by men who have had the ordinary education of the English leisured classes, and may be said to belong to the leisured classes themselves, inasmuch as their work is not allowed to absorb all their energies, and they live much the same lives as their neighbours who are not engaged in business. George Grafton was one of them, and Bunting would be another when his time came.

The Dragon was Miss Waterhouse, who had come to the house in Cadogan Place to teach Caroline fifteen years before, and had remained there ever since. She was the mildest, softest-hearted, most devoted and affectionate creature that was ever put into a position of authority; and the least authoritative. Yet her word 'went' through all the household.

"It *is* a jolly house, you know, dear," said Caroline, after she had fully examined pictures and papers. "I'm not sure that it isn't the very one, at last. But are you sure you can afford it, darling? It seems a great deal of money."

"It's rather cheap, really. They've stuck on a lot for the furniture and things. But they say that it's not nearly what they're worth. They'll sell the place without them if I like, and have a sale of them. They say they'd fetch much more than they're asking me."

"Well, then, why don't they do it?"

"Oh, I don't know. But we could go and have a look and see what they are worth—to us, I mean. After all, we should buy just that sort of thing, and it would take us a lot of time and trouble. We should probably have to pay more in the long run, too."

"I had rather looked forward to furnishing. I should like the trouble, and I've got plenty of time. And you've got plenty of money, darling, unless you've been deceiving us all this time."

"Well, shall we go and have a look at it together? What about to-morrow? Have you got anything to do?"

"Yes, lots. But I don't think there's anything I can't put off. How far is it from London? Shall we motor down?"

"Yes, if it's fine. We'd better, in any case, as it's five miles from a station, and we might not be able to get a car there. I don't think I could stand five miles in a horse fly."

"You're always so impatient, darling. Having your own way so much has spoiled you. I expect B will want to come."

"Well, she can if she likes."

"I think I'd rather it was just you and me. We always have a lot of fun together."

He gave her a hug and a kiss. The butler came in at that moment with the tea-tray, and smiled paternally. The footman who followed him looked abashed.

"Look, Jarvis, we've found the very house," said Caroline, exhibiting a large photograph of Abington Abbey.

"Lor, miss!" said the butler indulgently.

Beatrix and Barbara came in, accompanied by the Dragon.

Beatrix was even prettier than Caroline, with a frail ethereal loveliness that made her appear almost too good for this sinful world, which she wasn't at all, though she was a very charming creature. She was very fair, with a delicious complexion of cream and roses, and a figure of extreme slimness. She was still supposed to be in the schoolroom, and occasionally was so. She was only just eighteen, and wore her hair looped and tied with a big bow; but she would be presented in the spring and would then blossom fully.

Barbara was very fair too,—a pretty girl with a smiling good-humoured face, but not so pretty as her sisters. She had her arm in that of the Dragon.

Miss Waterhouse was tall and straight, with plentiful grey hair, and handsome regular features. Her age was given in

the Grafton family as 'fifty if a day,' but she was not quite so old as that. She was one of those women who seem to be cut out for motherhood, and to have missed their vocation by not marrying, just as a born artist would have missed his if he had never handled a brush or a pen. Fortunately, such women usually find somebody else's children round whom to throw their all-embracing tenderness. Miss Waterhouse had found the engaging family of Grafton, and loved them just as if they had been her own. It was probably a good deal owing to her that George Grafton had not made a second marriage. Men whose wives die young, leaving them with a family of small children, sometimes do so for their sake. But the young Graftons had missed nothing in the way of feminine care; their father had had no anxiety on their account during their childhood, and they had grown into companions to him, in a way that they might not have done if they had had a step-mother. He owed more than he knew to the Dragon, though he knew that he owed her a great deal. She was of importance in the house, but she was self-effacing. He was the centre round which everything moved. He received a great deal from his children that they would have given to their mother if she had been alive. He was a fortunate man, at the age of fifty; for family affection is one of the greatest gifts of life, and he had it in full measure.

"We've found the very house, boys," he said, as the three of them came in. "Abington Abbey, in Meadshire. Here you are. Replete with every modern comfort and convenience. Cara and I are going to take a day off to-morrow and go down to have a look at it."

Beatrix took up the photographs. "Yes, I like that house," she said. "I think you've struck it this time, darling. I'm sorry I can't come with you. I'm going to fence. But I trust to you both entirely."

"Do you think Uncle Jim will like you taking a day off, George, dear?" asked Barbara. "You had two last week, you know. You mustn't neglect your work. I don't. The Dragon won't let me."

"Barbara, darling," said Miss Waterhouse in a voice of gentle expostulation, "I don't think you should call your father George. It isn't respectful."

Barbara kissed her. "You don't mind, do you, Daddy?" she asked.

"Yes, I do, from you," he said. "You're my infant in arms. 'Daddy' is much prettier from little girls."

"Darling old thing!" she said. "You shall have it your own way. But we do spoil you. Now about this Abington Abbey. Are there rats? If so, I won't go there."

"Is there a nice clergyman?" asked Beatrix. "You and Caroline must call on the clergyman, and tell me what he's like when you come home; and how many children he has; and all about the neighbours. A nice house is all very well, but you want nice people too. Somebody you can make fun of."

"B darling," expostulated the Dragon again. "I don't think you should set out by making fun of people. You will want to make friends of your neighbours, not fun of them."

"We can do both," said Beatrix. "Will you be the Squire, dear? I should like you to be a little Squire. You'd do it awfully well, better than Uncle Jim."

Sir James Grafton was George's elder brother, and head of the bank. He was a good banker, but a better chemist. He had fitted himself up a laboratory in his country house, and spent as much of his time in it as possible, somewhat to the detriment of his duties as a landowner.

"It will be great fun being Squire's daughters," said Caroline. "I'm glad we are going to have a house of our very own. When you only take them for a month or two you feel like a Londoner all the time. B, you and I will become dewy English girls. I believe it will suit us."

"I don't want to become a dewy English girl just yet," said Beatrix. "It's all very well for you. You've had two seasons. Still, I shan't mind living in the country a good part of the year. There's always plenty to do there. But I do hope there'll be a nice lot of people about. Is it what they call a good residential neighbourhood, Daddy? They always make such a lot of that."

"I don't know much about Meadshire," said Grafton. "I think it's a trifle stuffy. People one never sees, who give themselves airs. Still, if we don't like them we needn't bother ourselves about them. We can get our own friends down."

"I'm not sure that's the right spirit," said Caroline. "I want to do the thing thoroughly. The church is very near the house, isn't it? I hope we're not right in the middle of the village too. You want to be a little by yourself in the country."

The photographs, indeed, showed the church—a fine square-towered Early English structure—directly opposite the front door of the house, the main part, of which was late

Jacobean. The cloisters and the old rambling mediæval buildings of the Abbey were around the corner, and other photographs showed them delightfully irregular and convincing. But the gardens and the park enclosed it all. The village was a quarter of a mile away, just outside one of the Lodge gates. "I asked all about that," said Grafton, explaining it to them.

They gathered round the tea-table in their comfortable luxurious room,—a happy affectionate family party. Their talk was all of the new departure that was at last to be made, for all of them took it for granted that they really had found the very house at last, and the preliminary visit and enquiries and negotiations were not likely to reveal any objections or difficulties.

George Grafton had been looking for a country house in a leisurely kind of way for the past ten years, and with rather more determination for about two. He belonged to the class of business man to whom it is as natural to have a country house as to have a London house, not only for convenience in respect of his work, but also for his social pleasures. He had been brought up chiefly in the country, at Frayne, in the opulent Sevenoaks region, which his brother now inhabited. He had usually taken a country house furnished during some part of the year, sometimes on the river for the summer months, sometimes for the winter, with a shoot attached to it. His pleasures were largely country pleasures. And his children liked what they had had of country life, of which they had skimmed the cream, in the periods they had spent in the houses that he had taken, and in frequent short visits to those of friends and relations. In the dead times of

the year they had come back to London, to their occupations and amusements there. One would have said that they had had the best of both. If they had been pure Londoners by birth and descent no doubt they would have had, and been well content. But it was in their blood on both sides to want that mental hold over a country home, which houses hired for a few months at a time cannot give. None of the houses their father had taken could be regarded as their home. Nor could a house in London, however spacious and homelike.

They talked about this now, over the tea-table. "It will be jolly to have all that space round you and to feel that it belongs to you," said Caroline. "I shall love to go out in the morning and stroll about, without a hat, and pick flowers."

"And watch them coming up," said Barbara. "That's what I shall like. And not having *always* to go out with the Dragon. Of course, I shall generally want you to come with me, darling, and I should always behave exactly as if you were there—naturally, as I'm a good girl. But I expect you will like to go out by yourself sometimes too, without one of the Graftons always hanging to you."

"You'll like the country, won't you, dear?" asked Beatrix. "I think you must go about with a key-basket, and feed the sparrows after breakfast."

"I was brought up in the country," said Miss Waterhouse. "I shall feel more at home there than you will."

"Your mother would have loved the garden," said Grafton. "She always missed her garden."

"Grandfather showed me the corner she had at Frampton when she was little," said Caroline. "There's an oak there

where she planted an acorn. It takes up nearly the whole of it now."

"Where is it?" asked her father. "I never knew that. I should like to see it."

Caroline described the spot to him. "Ah, yes," he said, "I do remember now; she showed it me herself when we were engaged."

"Grandfather showed it to me too," said Beatrix.

"Yes, I know," said Caroline quickly. "You were there."

Their mother was often spoken of in this way, naturally, and not with any sadness or regret. Caroline remembered her. Beatrix said she did, and was inclined to be a little jealous of Caroline's memories.

"I think I'll come with you after all, to-morrow," said Beatrix. "I can put off my fencing for once."

"Yes, do, darling," said Caroline. "You and I and Dad will have a jolly day together."



CHAPTER II

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THE VICAR

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The Vicar of Abington was the Reverend A. Salisbury Mercer, M.A., with a tendency towards hyphenation of the two names, though the more resounding of them had been given to him at baptism in token of his father's admiration for a great statesman. He was middle-sized, but held himself in such a way as to give the impression of height, or at least of dignity. His dignity was, indeed, dear to him, and his chief quarrel with the world, in which he had otherwise made himself very comfortable, was that there were so many people who failed to recognise it. His wife, however, was not one of them. She thought him the noblest of men, and more often in the right than not. He was somewhere in the early fifties, and she about ten years younger. She was a nice good-tempered little lady, inclined to easy laughter, but not getting much occasion for it in her home, for the Reverend A. Salisbury Mercer took life seriously, as became a man of his profession. She had brought him money—not a great deal of money, but enough to give him a well-appointed comfortable home, which the emoluments of Abington Vicarage would not have given him of themselves. In clerical and clerically-minded society he was accustomed to complain of the inequalities of such emoluments in the Church of England. "Look at Abington," he would say, some time in the course of the discussion. "There's a fine church,

which wants a good deal of keeping up, and there's a good house; but the value of the living has come down to about a hundred and thirty a year. No man without private means—considerable private means—could possibly afford to take it. And those men are getting scarcer and scarcer. After me, I don't know what will happen at Abington."

The village of Abington consisted mainly of one broad street lined on either side with red brick houses, cottages and little shops. The Vicarage was a good-sized Georgian house which abutted right on to the pavement, and had cottages built against it on one side and its own stable-yard on the other. The Vicar was often inclined to complain of its consequent lack of privacy, but the fact that its front windows provided an uninterrupted view of the village street, and what went on there, went a good way towards softening the deprivation. For he liked to know what his flock were doing. He took a good deal of responsibility for their actions.

One of the front rooms downstairs was the study. The Vicar's writing-table was arranged sideways to the window, so that he could get the light coming from the left while he was writing. If he looked up he had a good view right down the village street, which took a very slight turn when the Vicarage was passed. Another reason he had for placing his table in this position was that it was a good thing for his parishioners to see him at work. "The idea that a clergyman's life is an easy one," he would say to any one who might show a tendency to advance or even to hold that opinion, "is quite wrong. His work is never ended, either within or without. I myself spend many hours a day at my

desk, but all that the public sees of what I do there is represented by an hour or two in church during the week."

An irrepressible nephew of his wife engaged in London journalism, to whom this had once been said during a weekend visit, had replied: "Do you mean to say, Uncle, that the sermon you preached this morning took you hours to write up? I could have knocked it off in half an hour, and then I should have had most of it blue-pencilled."

That irreverent young man had not been asked to the house again, but it had been explained to him that sermon-writing was not the chief labour of a parish priest. He had a great deal of correspondence to get through, and he had to keep himself up in contemporary thought. The Vicar, indeed, did most of his reading sitting at his table, with his head propped on his hand. Few people could beat him in his knowledge of contemporary thought as infused through the brains of such writers as Mr. Philips Oppenheim, Mr. Charles Garvice, and Mr. William le Queux. Women writers he did not care for, but he made an exception in favour of Mrs. Florence Barclay, whose works he judged to contain the right proportions of strength and feeling. It must not be supposed that he was at all ashamed of his novel-reading, as some foolish people are. He was not ashamed of anything that he did, and, as for novels, he would point out that the proper study of mankind was man, and that next to studying the human race for yourself, it was the best thing to read the works of those authors who had trained themselves to observe it. Literature, as such, had nothing to do with it. If you wanted literature you could not have anything finer than certain parts of the Old Testament. It

was hardly worth while going to modern authors for that. The more literature there was in a modern novel, the less human nature you would be likely to find. No; it would generally be found that the public taste was the right taste in these matters, whatever people who thought themselves superior might say. He himself claimed no superiority in such matters. He supposed he had a brain about as good as the average, but what was good enough for some millions of his fellow-countrymen was good enough for him. He preferred to leave Mr. Henry James to others who thought differently.

The "Daily Telegraph" came by the second post, at about twelve o'clock, and Mrs. Mercer was accustomed to bring it in to her husband, with whatever letters there were for him or for her. She liked to stay and chat with him for a time, and sometimes, if there was anything that invited discussion in her letters, he would encourage her to do so. But he generally happened to be rather particularly busy at this time, not, of course, with novel-reading, which was usually left till a later hour. He would just 'glance through the paper' and then she must really leave him. They could talk about anything that wanted talking about at lunch. He would glance through the paper hurriedly and then lay it aside and return to his writing; but when she had obediently left the room he would take up the paper again. It was necessary for him to know what was going on in the world. His wife never took the paper away with her. She had her own "Daily Mirror," which he despised and sometimes made her ashamed of reading, but never to the extent of persuading her to give it up. He was a kind husband, and seldom let a

day go by without looking through it himself, out of sympathy with her.

On this March morning Mrs. Mercer brought in the "Daily Telegraph." It was all that had come by the post, except circulars, with which she never troubled him, and her own "Daily Mirror." She rather particularly wanted to talk to him, as he had come home late the night before from a day in London, and had not since felt inclined to tell her anything about it. Whether she would have succeeded or not if she had not come upon him reading a novel which he had bought the day before is doubtful. As it was, he did not send her away on the plea of being particularly busy.

"Ah!" he said, laying the book decidedly aside. "I was just looking through this. It is so good that I am quite looking forward to reading it this evening. Well, what's the news with you, my dear?"

Little Mrs. Mercer brightened. She knew his tones; and he was so nice when he was like this. "It's me that ought to ask what's the news with you," she said. "You haven't told me anything of what you did or heard yesterday."

He had been glancing through the paper, but looked up. "There is one thing I heard that may interest you," he said. "I sat next to a man at lunch at the Club and got into conversation with him, or rather he with me, and when it came out that I was Vicar of Abington he said: 'Is that the Abington in Meadshire?' and when I said yes he said: 'I've had Abington Abbey on my books for a long time, and I believe I've let it at last.' He was a House-Agent, a very respectable fellow; the membership of a club like that is rather mixed, but I should have taken him for a barrister at

least, except that he had seemed anxious to get into conversation with me."

"It's like that in trams and buses," said Mrs. Mercer. "Anybody who starts a conversation isn't generally as good as the person they start it with."

The Vicar let this pass. "He told me," he said, "that a client of his—he called him a client—who had been looking out for a country house for some time had taken a fancy to the Abbey, and said that if the photographs represented it properly, which they generally didn't when you saw the place itself, and everything else turned out to be as it had been represented, he thought it would suit him. He should come down and look at it very soon."

"Who is he?" asked Mrs. Mercer. "Did he tell you?"

"He did not tell me his name. He said he was a gentleman in the City. I asked the name, but apparently it isn't etiquette for that sort of people to give it. Every calling, of course, has its own conventions in such matters. I said we didn't think much of gentlemen in the City in this part of the world, and I rather hoped his friend would find that the place did not suit him. Some of us were not particularly rich, but we were quite content as we were. By that time he had become, as I thought, a little over-familiar, which is why I said that."

"I think you were quite right, dear. What did he say?"

"Oh, he laughed. He had finished his lunch by that time, and went away without saying a word. These half-gentlemen always break down in their manners somewhere."

"Anybody who could buy the Abbey must be pretty rich. It won't be a bad thing for the parish to have somebody with

money in it again."

"No, there is that. Anybody meaner than Mr. Compton-Brett it would be difficult to imagine. We could hardly be worse off in that respect than we are at present."

Mr. Compton-Brett was the owner of Abington Abbey, with the acreage attached thereto, and the advowson that went with it. He was a rich bachelor, who lived the life of a bookish recluse in chambers in the Albany. He had inherited Abington from a distant relation, and only visited it under extreme pressure, about once a year. He refused to let it, and had also refused many advantageous offers to sell. A buyer must accept his terms or leave it alone. They included the right of presentation to the living of Abington at its full actuarial value, and he would not sell the right separately. Rich men who don't want money allow themselves these luxuries of decision. It must amuse them in some way, and they probably need amusement. For a man who can't get it out of dealing with more money than will provide for his personal needs must be lacking in imagination.

"I hope they will be nice people to know," said Mrs. Mercer, "and won't give themselves airs."

"They won't give themselves airs over me twice," replied her husband loftily. "As a matter of fact, these new rich people who buy country places are often glad to have somebody to advise them. For all their money they are apt to make mistakes."

"Are they new people? Did the House-Agent say that?"

"Well, no. But it's more likely than not. 'A gentleman in the City,' he said. That probably means somebody who has

made a lot of money and wants to blossom out as a gentleman in the country."

Mrs. Mercer laughed at this, as it seemed to be expected of her. "I hope he *will* be a gentleman," she said. "I suppose there will be a lady too, and perhaps a family. It will be rather nice to have somebody living at the Abbey. We are not too well off for nice neighbours."

"I should think we are about as badly off as anybody can be," said the Vicar. "There is not a soul in the village itself who is any good to anybody except, of course, Mrs. Walter and Mollie; and as for the people round—well, you know yourself that a set of people more difficult to get on with it would be impossible to find anywhere. I am not a quarrelsome man. Except where my sacred calling is in question, my motto is 'Live and let live.' But the people about us here will not do that. Each one of them seems to want to quarrel. I sincerely hope that these new people at the Abbey will not want that. If they do, well——"

"Oh, I hope not," said little Mrs. Mercer hastily. "I do hope we shall all be good friends, especially if there is a nice family. Whoever buys the Abbey will be your patron, won't he, dear? Mr. Worthing has often told us that Mr. Compton-Brett won't sell the property without selling the patronage of the living."

"Whoever buys the property will have the *future* right to present to this living," replied the Vicar. "He will have no more right of patronage over me than anybody else. If there is likely to be any doubt about that I shall take an early opportunity of making it plain."

"Oh, I'm sure there won't be," said Mrs. Mercer. "I only meant that he *would* be patron of the living; not that he would have any authority over the present incumbent. Of course, I know he wouldn't have that."

"*You* know it, my dear, because you are in the way of knowing such elementary facts. But it is extraordinary what a large number of people are ignorant of them. A rich self-made City man, with not much education behind him, perhaps not even a churchman, is just the sort of person to be ignorant of such things. He is quite likely to think that because he has bought the right to present to a living he has also bought the right to domineer over the incumbent. It is what the rich Dissenters do over their ministers. If this new man is a Dissenter, as he is quite likely to be if he is anything at all, he will be almost certain to take that view. Well, as I say, I am a man of peace, but I know where I stand, and for the sake of my office I shall not budge an inch."

The Vicar breathed heavily. Mrs. Mercer felt vaguely distressed. Her husband was quite right, of course. There did seem to be a sort of conspiracy all round them to refuse him the recognition of his claims, which were only those he felt himself bound to make as a beneficed priest of the Church of England, and for the honour of the Church itself. Still, the recognition of such claims had not as yet been actually denied him from this new-comer, whose very name they did not yet know. It seemed to be settled that he was self-made, ignorant and in all probability a Dissenter; but he might be quite nice all the same, and his family still nicer. It seemed a pity to look for trouble before it came. They

hadn't, as it was admitted between them, too many friends, and she did like to have friends. Even among the people round them whom it was awkward to meet in the road there were some whom she would have been quite glad to be on friendly terms with again, in spite of the way they had behaved to her husband.

She was preparing to say in an encouraging manner something to the effect that people were generally nicer than they appeared to be at first sight. Her husband would almost certainly have replied that the exact contrary was the case, and brought forward instances known to them both to prove it. So it was just as well that there was a diversion at this moment. It took the form of a large opulent-looking motor-car, which was passing slowly down the village street, driven by a smart-looking uniformed chauffeur, while a middle-aged man and a young girl sat behind and looked about them; enquiringly on either side. They were George Grafton and Caroline, who supposed that they had reached the village of Abington by this time, but were as yet uncertain of the whereabouts of the Abbey. At that moment a question was being put by the chauffeur to one of the Vicar's parishioners on the pavement. He replied to it with a pointing finger, and the car slid off at a faster pace down the street.

"That must be them!" said Mrs. Mercer in some excitement. "They do look nice, Albert—quite gentle-people, I must say."

The Vicar had also gathered that it must be 'them,' and was as favourably impressed by their appearance as his wife. But it was not his way to take any opinion from her, or

even to appear to do so. "If it is our gentleman from the City," he said, "he would certainly be rich enough to make that sort of appearance. But I should think it is very unlikely. However, I shall probably find out if it is he, as I must go up to the church. I'll tell you when I come back."

She did not ask if she might go with him, although she must have known well enough that his visit to the church had been decided on, on the spur of the moment, so that he might get just that opportunity for investigation of which she herself would frankly have acknowledged she was desirous. He would have rebuked her for her prying disposition, and declined her company.

He went out at once, and she watched him walk quickly down the village street, his head and body held very stiff—a pompous man, a self-indulgent man, an ignorant self-satisfied man, but her lord and master, and with some qualities, mostly hidden from others, which caused her to admire him.

CHAPTER III

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THE FIRST VISIT

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The Vicar was in luck, if what he really wanted was an opportunity of introducing himself to the new-comers. At the end of the village the high stone wall which enclosed the park of the Abbey began, and curved away to the right. The entrance was by a pair of fine iron gates flanked by an ancient stone lodge. A little further on was a gate in the wall, which led to a path running across the park to the church. When he came in view of the entrance the car was standing in front of the gates, and its occupants were just alighting from it to make their way to the smaller gate.

The Vicar hurried up to them and took off his hat. "Are you trying to get in to the Abbey?" he said. "The people of the lodge ought to be there to open the gates."

Grafton turned to him with his pleasant smile. "There doesn't seem to be anybody there," he said. "We thought we'd go in by this gate, and my man could go and see if he could get the keys of the house. We want to look over it."

"But the lodge-keeper certainly ought to be there," said the Vicar, and hurried back to the larger gate, at which he lifted up his voice in accents of command. "Mrs. Roeband!" he called, "Mrs. Roeband! Roeband!! Where are you all? I'm afraid they must be out, sir."

"Yes, I'm afraid they must," said Grafton. "But please don't bother about it. Perhaps you could tell my man where

to get the keys."

"They ought not to leave the place like this," said the Vicar in an annoyed voice. "It's quite wrong; quite wrong. I must find out the reason for it. I think the best way, sir, would be for your man to go to the Estate Office. I'll tell him."

He gave directions to the chauffeur, while Grafton and Caroline stood by, stealing a glance at one another as some slight failure on the chauffeur's part to understand him caused the Vicar's voice to be raised impatiently.

It was a sweet and mild March day, but the long fast drive had chilled them both in spite of their furs. Caroline's pretty face looked almost that of a child with its fresh colour, but her long fur coat, very expensive even to the eye of the uninitiated, and the veil she wore, made the Vicar take her for the young wife of the 'gentleman from the City,' as he turned again towards them, especially as she had slipped her arm into her father's as they stood waiting, and was evidently much attached to him. Grafton himself looked younger than his years, with his skin freshened by the cold and his silver hair hidden under his cap. "A newly married couple," thought the Vicar, now ready to put himself at their service and do the honours of the place that they had come to see.

"It isn't far to walk to the Abbey," he said. "You will save time. I will show you the way."

He led them through the gate, and they found themselves in a beechy glade, with great trees rising on either side of the hollow, and a little herd of deer grazing not far from the path.