

***J. S. FLETCHER***

***THE PARADISE  
MYSTERY***

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# **The Paradise Mystery**

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# Table of Contents

- Chapter I. Only the Guardian
- Chapter II. Making an Enemy
- Chapter III. St. Wrytha's Stair
- Chapter IV. The Room at the Mitre
- Chapter V. The Scrap of Paper
- Chapter VI. By Misadventure
- Chapter VII. The Double Trail
- Chapter VIII. The Best Man
- Chapter IX. The House of his Friend
- Chapter X. Diplomacy
- Chapter XI. The Back Room
- Chapter XII. Murder of the Mason's Labourer
- Chapter XIII. Bryce is Asked a Question
- Chapter XIV. From the Past
- Chapter XV. The Double Offer
- Chapter XVI. Beforehand
- Chapter XVII. To be Shadowed
- Chapter XVIII. Surprise
- Chapter XIX. The Subtlety of the Devil
- Chapter XX. Jettison Takes a Hand
- Chapter XXI. The Saxonsteade Arms
- Chapter XXII. Other People's Notions
- Chapter XXIII. The Unexpected
- Chapter XXIV. Finesse
- Chapter XXV. The Old Well House
- Chapter XXVI. The Other Man
- Chapter XXVII. The Guarded Secret

# Chapter I. Only the Guardian

## Table of Contents

American tourists, sure appreciators of all that is ancient and picturesque in England, invariably come to a halt, holding their breath in a sudden catch of wonder, as they pass through the half-ruinous gateway which admits to the Close of Wrychester. Nowhere else in England is there a fairer prospect of old-world peace. There before their eyes, set in the centre of a great green sward, fringed by tall elms and giant beeches, rises the vast fabric of the thirteenth-century Cathedral, its high spire piercing the skies in which rooks are for ever circling and calling. The time-worn stone, at a little distance delicate as lacework, is transformed at different hours of the day into shifting shades of colour, varying from grey to purple: the massiveness of the great nave and transepts contrasts impressively with the gradual tapering of the spire, rising so high above turret and clerestory that it at last becomes a mere line against the ether. In morning, as in afternoon, or in evening, here is a perpetual atmosphere of rest; and not around the great church alone, but in the quaint and ancient houses which fence in the Close. Little less old than the mighty mass of stone on which their ivy-framed windows look, these houses make the casual observer feel that here, if anywhere in the world, life must needs run smoothly. Under those high gables, behind those mullioned windows, in the beautiful old gardens lying between the stone porches and the elm-shadowed lawn, nothing, one would think, could possibly exist but leisured and pleasant existence: even the busy streets of the old city, outside the crumbling gateway, seem, for the moment, far off.

In one of the oldest of these houses, half hidden behind trees and shrubs in a corner of the Close, three people sat

at breakfast one fine May morning. The room in which they sat was in keeping with the old house and its surroundings—a long, low-ceilinged room, with oak panelling around its walls, and oak beams across its roof—a room of old furniture, and, old pictures, and old books, its antique atmosphere relieved by great masses of flowers, set here and there in old china bowls: through its wide windows, the casements of which were thrown wide open, there was an inviting prospect of a high-edged flower garden, and, seen in vistas through the trees and shrubberies, of patches of the west front of the Cathedral, now sombre and grey in shadow. But on the garden and into this flower-scented room the sun was shining gaily through the trees, and making gleams of light on the silver and china on the table and on the faces of the three people who sat around it.

Of these three, two were young, and the third was one of those men whose age it is never easy to guess—a tall, clean-shaven, bright-eyed, alert-looking man, good-looking in a clever, professional sort of way, a man whom no one could have taken for anything but a member of one of the learned callings. In some lights he looked no more than forty: a strong light betrayed the fact that his dark hair had a streak of grey in it, and was showing a tendency to whiten about the temples. A strong, intellectually superior man, this, scrupulously groomed and well-dressed, as befitted what he really was—a medical practitioner with an excellent connection amongst the exclusive society of a cathedral town. Around him hung an undeniable air of content and prosperity—as he turned over a pile of letters which stood by his plate, or glanced at the morning newspaper which lay at his elbow, it was easy to see that he had no cares beyond those of the day, and that they—so far as he knew then—were not likely to affect him greatly. Seeing him in these pleasant domestic circumstances, at the head of his table, with abundant evidences of comfort and refinement and modest luxury about him, any one would have said, without

hesitation, that Dr. Mark Ransford was undeniably one of the fortunate folk of this world.

The second person of the three was a boy of apparently seventeen—a well-built, handsome lad of the senior schoolboy type, who was devoting himself in business-like fashion to two widely-differing pursuits—one, the consumption of eggs and bacon and dry toast; the other, the study of a Latin textbook, which he had propped up in front of him against the old-fashioned silver cruet. His quick eyes wandered alternately between his book and his plate; now and then he muttered a line or two to himself. His companions took no notice of these combinations of eating and learning: they knew from experience that it was his way to make up at breakfast-time for the moments he had stolen from his studies the night before.

It was not difficult to see that the third member of the party, a girl of nineteen or twenty, was the boy's sister. Each had a wealth of brown hair, inclining, in the girl's case to a shade that had tints of gold in it; each had grey eyes, in which there was a mixture of blue; each had a bright, vivid colour; each was undeniably good-looking and eminently healthy. No one would have doubted that both had lived a good deal of an open-air existence: the boy was already muscular and sinewy: the girl looked as if she was well acquainted with the tennis racket and the golf-stick. Nor would any one have made the mistake of thinking that these two were blood relations of the man at the head of the table—between them and him there was not the least resemblance of feature, of colour, or of manner.

While the boy learnt the last lines of his Latin, and the doctor turned over the newspaper, the girl read a letter—evidently, from the large sprawling handwriting, the missive of some girlish correspondent. She was deep in it when, from one of the turrets of the Cathedral, a bell began to ring. At that, she glanced at her brother.

“There's Martin, Dick!” she said. “You'll have to hurry.”

Many a long year before that, in one of the bygone centuries, a worthy citizen of Wrychester, Martin by name, had left a sum of money to the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral on condition that as long as ever the Cathedral stood, they should cause to be rung a bell from its smaller bell-tower for three minutes before nine o'clock every morning, all the year round. What Martin's object had been no one now knew—but this bell served to remind young gentlemen going to offices, and boys going to school, that the hour of their servitude was near. And Dick Bewery, without a word, bolted half his coffee, snatched up his book, grabbed at a cap which lay with more books on a chair close by, and vanished through the open window. The doctor laughed, laid aside his newspaper, and handed his cup across the table.

"I don't think you need bother yourself about Dick's ever being late, Mary," he said. "You are not quite aware of the power of legs that are only seventeen years old. Dick could get to any given point in just about one-fourth of the time that I could, for instance—moreover, he has a cunning knowledge of every short cut in the city."

Mary Bewery took the empty cup and began to refill it.

"I don't like him to be late," she remarked. "It's the beginning of bad habits."

"Oh, well!" said Ransford indulgently. "He's pretty free from anything of that sort, you know. I haven't even suspected him of smoking, yet."

"That's because he thinks smoking would stop his growth and interfere with his cricket," answered Mary. "He would smoke if it weren't for that."

"That's giving him high praise, then," said Ransford. "You couldn't give him higher! Know how to repress his inclinations. An excellent thing—and most unusual, I fancy. Most people—don't!"

He took his refilled cup, rose from the table, and opened a box of cigarettes which stood on the mantelpiece. And the

girl, instead of picking up her letter again, glanced at him a little doubtfully.

“That reminds me of—of something I wanted to say to you,” she said. “You’re quite right about people not repressing their inclinations. I—I wish some people would!”

Ransford turned quickly from the hearth and gave her a sharp look, beneath which her colour heightened. Her eyes shifted their gaze away to her letter, and she picked it up and began to fold it nervously. And at that Ransford rapped out a name, putting a quick suggestion of meaning inquiry into his voice.

“Bryce?” he asked.

The girl nodded her face showing distinct annoyance and dislike. Before saying more, Ransford lighted a cigarette.

“Been at it again?” he said at last. “Since last time?”

“Twice,” she answered. “I didn’t like to tell you—I’ve hated to bother you about it. But—what am I to do? I dislike him intensely—I can’t tell why, but it’s there, and nothing could ever alter the feeling. And though I told him—before—that it was useless—he mentioned it again—yesterday—at Mrs. Folliot’s garden-party.”

“Confound his impudence!” growled Ransford. “Oh, well!—I’ll have to settle with him myself. It’s useless trifling with anything like that. I gave him a quiet hint before. And since he won’t take it—all right!”

“But—what shall you do?” she asked anxiously. “Not—send him away?”

“If he’s any decency about him, he’ll go—after what I say to him,” answered Ransford. “Don’t you trouble yourself about it—I’m not at all keen about him. He’s a clever enough fellow, and a good assistant, but I don’t like him, personally—never did.”

“I don’t want to think that anything that I say should lose him his situation—or whatever you call it,” she remarked slowly. “That would seem—”



“No need to bother,” interrupted Ransford. “He’ll get another in two minutes—so to speak. Anyway, we can’t have this going on. The fellow must be an ass! When I was young—”

He stopped short at that, and turning away, looked out across the garden as if some recollection had suddenly struck him.

“When you were young—which is, of course, such an awfully long time since!” said the girl, a little teasingly. “What?”

“Only that if a woman said No—unmistakably—once, a man took it as final,” replied Ransford. “At least—so I was always given to believe. Nowadays—”

“You forget that Mr. Pemberton Bryce is what most people would call a very pushing young man,” said Mary. “If he doesn’t get what he wants in this world, it won’t be for not asking for it. But—if you must speak to him—and I really think you must!—will you tell him that he is not going to get—me? Perhaps he’ll take it finally from you—as my guardian.”

“I don’t know if parents and guardians count for much in these degenerate days,” said Ransford. “But—I won’t have him annoying you. And—I suppose it has come to annoyance?”

“It’s very annoying to be asked three times by a man whom you’ve told flatly, once for all, that you don’t want him, at any time, ever!” she answered. “It’s—irritating!”

“All right,” said Ransford quietly. “I’ll speak to him. There’s going to be no annoyance for you under this roof.”

The girl gave him a quick glance, and Ransford turned away from her and picked up his letters.

“Thank you,” she said. “But—there’s no need to tell me that, because I know it already. Now I wonder if you’ll tell me something more?”

Ransford turned back with a sudden apprehension.

“Well?” he asked brusquely. “What?”

“When are you going to tell me all about—Dick and myself?” she asked. “You promised that you would, you know, some day. And—a whole year’s gone by since then. And—Dick’s seventeen! He won’t be satisfied always—just to know no more than that our father and mother died when we were very little, and that you’ve been guardian—and all that you have been!—to us. Will he, now?”

Ransford laid down his letters again, and thrusting his hands in his pockets, squared his shoulders against the mantelpiece. “Don’t you think you might wait until you’re twenty-one?” he asked.

“Why?” she said, with a laugh. “I’m just twenty—do you really think I shall be any wiser in twelve months? Of course I shan’t!”

“You don’t know that,” he replied. “You may be—a great deal wiser.”

“But what has that got to do with it?” she persisted. “Is there any reason why I shouldn’t be told—everything?”

She was looking at him with a certain amount of demand—and Ransford, who had always known that some moment of this sort must inevitably come, felt that she was not going to be put off with ordinary excuses. He hesitated—and she went on speaking.

“You know,” she continued, almost pleadingly. “We don’t know anything—at all. I never have known, and until lately Dick has been too young to care—”

“Has he begun asking questions?” demanded Ransford hastily.

“Once or twice, lately—yes,” replied Mary. “It’s only natural.” She laughed a little—a forced laugh. “They say,” she went on, “that it doesn’t matter, nowadays, if you can’t tell who your grandfather was—but, just think, we don’t know who our father was—except that his name was John Bewery. That doesn’t convey much.”

“You know more,” said Ransford. “I told you—always have told you—that he was an early friend of mine, a man of

business, who, with your mother, died young, and I, as their friend, became guardian to you and Dick. Is—is there anything much more that I could tell?”

“There’s something I should very much like to know—personally,” she answered, after a pause which lasted so long that Ransford began to feel uncomfortable under it. “Don’t be angry—or hurt—if I tell you plainly what it is. I’m quite sure it’s never even occurred to Dick—but I’m three years ahead of him. It’s this—have we been dependent on you?”

Ransford’s face flushed and he turned deliberately to the window, and for a moment stood staring out on his garden and the glimpses of the Cathedral. And just as deliberately as he had turned away, he turned back.

“No!” he said. “Since you ask me, I’ll tell you that. You’ve both got money—due to you when you’re of age. It—it’s in my hands. Not a great lot—but sufficient to—to cover all your expenses. Education—everything. When you’re twenty-one, I’ll hand over yours—when Dick’s twenty-one, his. Perhaps I ought to have told you all that before, but—I didn’t think it necessary. I—I dare say I’ve a tendency to let things slide.”

“You’ve never let things slide about us,” she replied quickly, with a sudden glance which made him turn away again. “And I only wanted to know—because I’d got an idea that—well, that we were owing everything to you.”

“Not from me!” he exclaimed.

“No—that would never be!” she said. “But—don’t you understand? I—wanted to know—something. Thank you. I won’t ask more now.”

“I’ve always meant to tell you—a good deal,” remarked Ransford, after another pause. “You see, I can scarcely—yet—realize that you’re both growing up! You were at school a year ago. And Dick is still very young. Are—are you more satisfied now?” he went on anxiously. “If not—”

“I’m quite satisfied,” she answered. “Perhaps—some day—you’ll tell me more about our father and mother?—but never mind even that now. You’re sure you haven’t minded my asking—what I have asked?”

“Of course not—of course not!” he said hastily. “I ought to have remembered. And—but we’ll talk again. I must get into the surgery—and have a word with Bryce, too.”

“If you could only make him see reason and promise not to offend again,” she said. “Wouldn’t that solve the difficulty?”

Ransford shook his head and made no answer. He picked up his letters again and went out, and down a long stone-walled passage which led to his surgery at the side of the house. He was alone there when he had shut the door—and he relieved his feelings with a deep groan.

“Heaven help me if the lad ever insists on the real truth and on having proofs and facts given to him!” he muttered. “I shouldn’t mind telling her, when she’s a bit older—but he wouldn’t understand as she would. Anyway, thank God I can keep up the pleasant fiction about the money without her ever knowing that I told her a deliberate lie just now. But—what’s in the future? Here’s one man to be dismissed already, and there’ll be others, and one of them will be the favoured man. That man will have to be told! And—so will she, then. And—my God! she doesn’t see, and mustn’t see, that I’m madly in love with her myself! She’s no idea of it—and she shan’t have; I must—must continue to be—only the guardian!”

He laughed a little cynically as he laid his letters down on his desk and proceeded to open them—in which occupation he was presently interrupted by the opening of the side-door and the entrance of Mr. Pemberton Bryce.

## Chapter II. Making an Enemy

### Table of Contents

It was characteristic of Pemberton Bryce that he always walked into a room as if its occupant were asleep and he was afraid of waking him. He had a gentle step which was soft without being stealthy, and quiet movements which brought him suddenly to anybody's side before his presence was noticed. He was by Ransford's desk ere Ransford knew he was in the surgery—and Ransford's sudden realization of his presence roused a certain feeling of irritation in his mind, which he instantly endeavoured to suppress—it was no use getting cross with a man of whom you were about to rid yourself, he said to himself. And for the moment, after replying to his assistant's greeting—a greeting as quiet as his entrance—he went on reading his letters, and Bryce turned off to that part of the surgery in which the drugs were kept, and busied himself in making up some prescription. Ten minutes went by in silence; then Ransford pushed his correspondence aside, laid a paper-weight on it, and twisting his chair round, looked at the man to whom he was going to say some unpleasant things. Within himself he was revolving a question—how would Bryce take it?

He had never liked this assistant of his, although he had then had him in employment for nearly two years. There was something about Pemberton Bryce which he did not understand and could not fathom. He had come to him with excellent testimonials and good recommendations; he was well up to his work, successful with patients, thoroughly capable as a general practitioner—there was no fault to be found with him on any professional grounds. But to Ransford his personality was objectionable—why, he was not quite sure. Outwardly, Bryce was rather more than presentable—a tall, good-looking man of twenty-eight or thirty, whom some

people—women especially—would call handsome; he was the sort of young man who knows the value of good clothes and a smart appearance, and his professional manner was all that could be desired. But Ransford could not help distinguishing between Bryce the doctor and Bryce the man—and Bryce the man he did not like. Outside the professional part of him, Bryce seemed to him to be undoubtedly deep, sly, cunning—he conveyed the impression of being one of those men whose ears are always on the stretch, who take everything in and give little out. There was a curious air of watchfulness and of secrecy about him in private matters which was as repellent—to Ransford’s thinking—as it was hard to explain. Anyway, in private affairs, he did not like his assistant, and he liked him less than ever as he glanced at him on this particular occasion.

“I want a word with you,” he said curtly. “I’d better say it now.”

Bryce, who was slowly pouring some liquid from one bottle into another, looked quietly across the room and did not interrupt himself in his work. Ransford knew that he must have recognized a certain significance in the words just addressed to him—but he showed no outward sign of it, and the liquid went on trickling from one bottle to the other with the same uniform steadiness.

“Yes?” said Bryce inquiringly. “One moment.”

He finished his task calmly, put the corks in the bottles, labelled one, restored the other to a shelf, and turned round. Not a man to be easily startled—not easily turned from a purpose, this, thought Ransford as he glanced at Bryce’s eyes, which had a trick of fastening their gaze on people with an odd, disconcerting persistency.

“I’m sorry to say what I must say,” he began. “But—you’ve brought it on yourself. I gave you a hint some time ago that your attentions were not welcome to Miss Bewery.”

Bryce made no immediate response. Instead, leaning almost carelessly and indifferently against the table at which he had been busy with drugs and bottles, he took a small file from his waistcoat pocket and began to polish his carefully cut nails.

“Yes?” he said, after a pause. “Well?”

“In spite of it,” continued Ransford, “you’ve since addressed her again on the matter—not merely once, but twice.”

Bryce put his file away, and thrusting his hands in his pockets, crossed his feet as he leaned back against the table—his whole attitude suggesting, whether meaningly or not, that he was very much at his ease.

“There’s a great deal to be said on a point like this,” he observed. “If a man wishes a certain young woman to become his wife, what right has any other man—or the young woman herself, for that matter to say that he mustn’t express his desires to her?”

“None,” said Ransford, “provided he only does it once—and takes the answer he gets as final.”

“I disagree with you entirely,” retorted Bryce. “On the last particular, at any rate. A man who considers any word of a woman’s as being final is a fool. What a woman thinks on Monday she’s almost dead certain not to think on Tuesday. The whole history of human relationship is on my side there. It’s no opinion—it’s a fact.”

Ransford stared at this frank remark, and Bryce went on, coolly and imperturbably, as if he had been discussing a medical problem.

“A man who takes a woman’s first answer as final,” he continued, “is, I repeat, a fool. There are lots of reasons why a woman shouldn’t know her own mind at the first time of asking. She may be too surprised. She mayn’t be quite decided. She may say one thing when she really means another. That often happens. She isn’t much better equipped at the second time of asking. And there are

women—young ones—who aren't really certain of themselves at the third time. All that's common sense."

"I'll tell you what it is!" suddenly exclaimed Ransford, after remaining silent for a moment under this flow of philosophy. "I'm not going to discuss theories and ideas. I know one young woman, at any rate, who is certain of herself. Miss Bewery does not feel any inclination to you—now, nor at any time to be! She's told you so three times. And—you should take her answer and behave yourself accordingly!"

Bryce favoured his senior with a searching look.

"How does Miss Bewery know that she mayn't be inclined to—in the future?" he asked. "She may come to regard me with favour."

"No, she won't!" declared Ransford. "Better hear the truth, and be done with it. She doesn't like you—and she doesn't want to, either. Why can't you take your answer like a man?"

"What's your conception of a man?" asked Bryce.

"That!—and a good one," exclaimed Ransford.

"May satisfy you—but not me," said Bryce. "Mine's different. My conception of a man is of a being who's got some perseverance. You can get anything in this world—anything!—by pegging away for it."

"You're not going to get my ward," suddenly said Ransford. "That's flat! She doesn't want you—and she's now said so three times. And—I support her."

"What have you against me?" asked Bryce calmly. "If, as you say, you support her in her resolution not to listen to my proposals, you must have something against me. What is it?"

"That's a question you've no right to put," replied Ransford, "for it's utterly unnecessary. So I'm not going to answer it. I've nothing against you as regards your work—nothing! I'm willing to give you an excellent testimonial."



“Oh!” remarked Bryce quietly. “That means—you wish me to go away?”

“I certainly think it would be best,” said Ransford.

“In that case,” continued Bryce, more coolly than ever, “I shall certainly want to know what you have against me—or what Miss Bewery has against me. Why am I objected to as a suitor? You, at any rate, know who I am—you know that my father is of our own profession, and a man of reputation and standing, and that I myself came to you on high recommendation. Looked at from my standpoint, I’m a thoroughly eligible young man. And there’s a point you forget—there’s no mystery about me!”

Ransford turned sharply in his chair as he noticed the emphasis which Bryce put on his last word.

“What do you mean?” he demanded.

“What I’ve just said,” replied Bryce. “There’s no mystery attaching to me. Any question about me can be answered. Now, you can’t say that as regards your ward. That’s a fact, Dr. Ransford.”

Ransford, in years gone by, had practised himself in the art of restraining his temper—naturally a somewhat quick one. And he made a strong effort in that direction now, recognizing that there was something behind his assistant’s last remark, and that Bryce meant him to know it was there.

“I’ll repeat what I’ve just said,” he answered. “What do you mean by that?”

“I hear things,” said Bryce. “People will talk—even a doctor can’t refuse to hear what gossiping and garrulous patients say. Since she came to you from school, a year ago, Wrychester people have been much interested in Miss Bewery, and in her brother, too. And there are a good many residents of the Close—you know their nice, inquisitive ways!—who want to know who the sister and brother really are—and what your relationship is to them!”

“Confound their impudence!” growled Ransford.

“By all means,” agreed Bryce. “And—for all I care—let them be confounded, too. But if you imagine that the choice and select coteries of a cathedral town, consisting mainly of the relicts of deceased deans, canons, prebendaries and the like, and of maiden aunts, elderly spinsters, and tea-table-haunting curates, are free from gossip—why, you’re a singularly innocent person!”

“They’d better not begin gossiping about my affairs,” said Ransford. “Otherwise—”

“You can’t stop them from gossiping about your affairs,” interrupted Bryce cheerfully. “Of course they gossip about your affairs; have gossiped about them; will continue to gossip about them. It’s human nature!”

“You’ve heard them?” asked Ransford, who was too vexed to keep back his curiosity. “You yourself?”

“As you are aware, I am often asked out to tea,” replied Bryce, “and to garden-parties, and tennis-parties, and choice and cosy functions patronized by curates and associated with crumpets. I have heard—with these ears. I can even repeat the sort of thing I have heard. ‘That dear, delightful Miss Bewery—what a charming girl! And that good-looking boy, her brother—quite a dear! Now I wonder who they really are? Wards of Dr. Ransford, of course! Really, how very romantic!—and just a little—eh?—unusual? Such a comparatively young man to have such a really charming girl as his ward! Can’t be more than forty-five himself, and she’s twenty—how very, very romantic! Really, one would think there ought to be a chaperon!’”

“Damn!” said Ransford under his breath.

“Just so,” agreed Bryce. “But—that’s the sort of thing. Do you want more? I can supply an unlimited quantity in the piece if you like. But it’s all according to sample.”

“So—in addition to your other qualities,” remarked Ransford, “you’re a gossip?”

Bryce smiled slowly and shook his head.

“No,” he replied. “I’m a listener. A good one, too. But do you see my point? I say—there’s no mystery about me. If Miss Bewery will honour me with her hand, she’ll get a man whose antecedents will bear the strictest investigation.”

“Are you inferring that hers won’t?” demanded Ransford.

“I’m not inferring anything,” said Bryce. “I am speaking for myself, of myself. Pressing my own claim, if you like, on you, the guardian. You might do much worse than support my claims, Dr. Ransford.”

“Claims, man!” retorted Ransford. “You’ve got no claims! What are you talking about? Claims!”

“My pretensions, then,” answered Bryce. “If there is a mystery—as Wrychester people say there is—about Miss Bewery, it would be safe with me. Whatever you may think, I’m a thoroughly dependable man—when it’s in my own interest.”

“And—when it isn’t?” asked Ransford. “What are you then?—as you’re so candid.”

“I could be a very bad enemy,” replied Bryce.

There was a moment’s silence, during which the two men looked attentively at each other.

“I’ve told you the truth,” said Ransford at last. “Miss Bewery flatly refuses to entertain any idea whatever of ever marrying you. She earnestly hopes that that eventuality may never be mentioned to her again. Will you give me your word of honour to respect her wishes?”

“No!” answered Bryce. “I won’t!”

“Why not?” asked Ransford, with a faint show of anger. “A woman’s wishes!”

“Because I may consider that I see signs of a changed mind in her,” said Bryce. “That’s why.”

“You’ll never see any change of mind,” declared Ransford. “That’s certain. Is that your fixed determination?”

“It is,” answered Bryce. “I’m not the sort of man who is easily repelled.”

“Then, in that case,” said Ransford, “we had better part company.” He rose from his desk, and going over to a safe which stood in a corner, unlocked it and took some papers from an inside drawer. He consulted one of these and turned to Bryce. “You remember our agreement?” he continued. “Your engagement was to be determined by a three months’ notice on either side, or, at my will, at any time by payment of three months’ salary?”

“Quite right,” agreed Bryce. “I remember, of course.”

“Then I’ll give you a cheque for three months’ salary—now,” said Ransford, and sat down again at his desk. “That will settle matters definitely—and, I hope, agreeably.”

Bryce made no reply. He remained leaning against the table, watching Ransford write the cheque. And when Ransford laid the cheque down at the edge of the desk he made no movement towards it.

“You must see,” remarked Ransford, half apologetically, “that it’s the only thing I can do. I can’t have any man who’s not—not welcome to her, to put it plainly—causing any annoyance to my ward. I repeat, Bryce—you must see it!”

“I have nothing to do with what you see,” answered Bryce. “Your opinions are not mine, and mine aren’t yours. You’re really turning me away—as if I were a dishonest foreman!—because in my opinion it would be a very excellent thing for her and for myself if Miss Bewery would consent to marry me. That’s the plain truth.”

Ransford allowed himself to take a long and steady look at Bryce. The thing was done now, and his dismissed assistant seemed to be taking it quietly—and Ransford’s curiosity was aroused.

“I can’t make you out!” he exclaimed. “I don’t know whether you’re the most cynical young man I ever met, or whether you’re the most obtuse—”

“Not the last, anyway,” interrupted Bryce. “I assure you of that!”

“Can’t you see for yourself, then, man, that the girl doesn’t want you!” said Ransford. “Hang it!—for anything you know to the contrary, she may have—might have—other ideas!”

Bryce, who had been staring out of a side window for the last minute or two, suddenly laughed, and, lifting a hand, pointed into the garden. And Ransford turned—and saw Mary Bewery walking there with a tall lad, whom he recognized as one Sackville Bonham, stepson of Mr. Folliot, a wealthy resident of the Close. The two young people were laughing and chatting together with evident great friendliness.

“Perhaps,” remarked Bryce quietly, “her ideas run in—that direction? In which case, Dr. Ransford, you’ll have trouble. For Mrs. Folliot, mother of yonder callow youth, who’s the apple of her eye, is one of the inquisitive ladies of whom I’ve just told you, and if her son unites himself with anybody, she’ll want to know exactly who that anybody is. You’d far better have supported me as an aspirant! However—I suppose there’s no more to say.”

“Nothing!” answered Ransford. “Except to say good-day—and good-bye to you. You needn’t remain—I’ll see to everything. And I’m going out now. I think you’d better not exchange any farewells with any one.”

Bryce nodded silently, and Ransford, picking up his hat and gloves, left the surgery by the side door. A moment later, Bryce saw him crossing the Close.

# Chapter III. St. Wrytha's Stair

## Table of Contents

The summarily dismissed assistant, thus left alone, stood for a moment in evident deep thought before he moved towards Ransford's desk and picked up the cheque. He looked at it carefully, folded it neatly, and put it away in his pocket-book; after that he proceeded to collect a few possessions of his own, instruments, books from various drawers and shelves. He was placing these things in a small hand-bag when a gentle tap sounded on the door by which patients approached the surgery.

"Come in!" he called.

There was no response, although the door was slightly ajar; instead, the knock was repeated, and at that Bryce crossed the room and flung the door open.

A man stood outside—an elderly, slight-figured, quiet-looking man, who looked at Bryce with a half-deprecating, half-nervous air; the air of a man who was shy in manner and evidently fearful of seeming to intrude. Bryce's quick, observant eyes took him in at a glance, noting a much worn and lined face, thin grey hair and tired eyes; this was a man, he said to himself, who had seen trouble. Nevertheless, not a poor man, if his general appearance was anything to go by—he was well and even expensively dressed, in the style generally affected by well-to-do merchants and city men; his clothes were fashionably cut, his silk hat was new, his linen and boots irreproachable; a fine diamond pin gleamed in his carefully arranged cravat. Why, then, this unmistakably furtive and half-frightened manner—which seemed to be somewhat relieved at the sight of Bryce?

“Is this—is Dr. Ransford within?” asked the stranger. “I was told this is his house.”

“Dr. Ransford is out,” replied Bryce. “Just gone out—not five minutes ago. This is his surgery. Can I be of use?”

The man hesitated, looking beyond Bryce into the room.

“No, thank you,” he said at last. “I—no, I don’t want professional services—I just called to see Dr. Ransford—I—the fact is, I once knew some one of that name. It’s no matter—at present.”

Bryce stepped outside and pointed across the Close.

“Dr. Ransford,” he said, “went over there—I rather fancy he’s gone to the Deanery—he has a case there. If you went through Paradise, you’d very likely meet him coming back—the Deanery is the big house in the far corner yonder.”

The stranger followed Bryce’s outstretched finger.

“Paradise?” he said, wonderingly. “What’s that?”

Bryce pointed to a long stretch of grey wall which projected from the south wall of the Cathedral into the Close.

“It’s an enclosure—between the south porch and the transept,” he said. “Full of old tombs and trees—a sort of wilderness—why called Paradise I don’t know. There’s a short cut across it to the Deanery and that part of the Close—through that archway you see over there. If you go across, you’re almost sure to meet Dr. Ransford.”

“I’m much obliged to you,” said the stranger. “Thank you.”

He turned away in the direction which Bryce had indicated, and Bryce went back—only to go out again and call after him.

“If you don’t meet him, shall I say you’ll call again?” he asked. “And—what name?”

The stranger shook his head.

“It’s immaterial,” he answered. “I’ll see him—somewhere—or later. Many thanks.”

He went on his way towards Paradise, and Bryce returned to the surgery and completed his preparations for departure. And in the course of things, he more than once looked through the window into the garden and saw Mary Bewery still walking and talking with young Sackville Bonham.

“No,” he muttered to himself. “I won’t trouble to exchange any farewells—not because of Ransford’s hint, but because there’s no need. If Ransford thinks he’s going to drive me out of Wrychester before I choose to go he’s badly mistaken—it’ll be time enough to say farewell when I take my departure—and that won’t be just yet. Now I wonder who that old chap was? Knew some one of Ransford’s name once, did he? Probably Ransford himself—in which case he knows more of Ransford than anybody in Wrychester knows—for nobody in Wrychester knows anything beyond a few years back. No, Dr. Ransford!—no farewells—to anybody! A mere departure—till I turn up again.”

But Bryce was not to get away from the old house without something in the nature of a farewell. As he walked out of the surgery by the side entrance, Mary Bewery, who had just parted from young Bonham in the garden and was about to visit her dogs in the stable yard, came along: she and Bryce met, face to face. The girl flushed, not so much from embarrassment as from vexation; Bryce, cool as ever, showed no sign of any embarrassment. Instead, he laughed, tapping the hand-bag which he carried under one arm.

“Summarily turned out—as if I had been stealing the spoons,” he remarked. “I go—with my small belongings. This is my first reward—for devotion.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” answered Mary, sweeping by him with a highly displeased glance. “Except that you have brought it on yourself.”

“A very feminine retort!” observed Bryce. “But—there is no malice in it? Your anger won’t last more than—shall we say a day?”