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HELENA, LADY HARROGATE

By JOHN B. HARWOOD, Author of 'Lady Flavia.'

CHAPTER I. – THREATENED

‘No, my lord; I do not know him; nor, I think, does any one in the village. But during the few weeks that I have been at High Tor Churchtown, I have seen him very often indeed.’

The speaker was a young girl, of some twenty years at most. Her bearing was grave and modest, and her attire scrupulously plain; but there are cases in which sovereign beauty will assert herself, and Ethel Gray, the newly appointed school-mistress, was more than pretty. That slender form and faultless face, the dazzling purity of the complexion, and the lustre of the violet eyes, that contrasted so well with the wealth of dark hair simply braided back from the temples and twisted into a massive coil – these conferred beauty, if ever woman, since Eve's time, deserved to be called beautiful.

It was a bright balmy day in June, and through the large window of the school-room, now open, floated the scent of flowers and the hum of bees. Within the room, standing beside the teacher, were two gentlemen; while on each side of the table stood the children, their wondering eyes fixed upon the visitors. They well knew the kindly face of the gray-haired Earl of Wolverhampton, the elder of the two, whose park-gates were almost within sight of the school of which he was patron. But they had never before seen the shrewd rugged features of the middle-aged member of parliament, the Right Hon. Stephen Hammond,

Under-secretary of State, by whom he was accompanied.

Ethel Gray's words had been uttered in reply to an inquiry from the Earl as to a swarthy man of sinister aspect and powerful build who was lounging near the low gate of the school-house garden.

‘That is not a face,’ said the Earl, thinking of quarter-sessions, tramps, gipsies, and poachers – ‘which I am pleased to see here among my good people. – What is your opinion, Hammond, of the owner of it?’

‘I think that I had rather not meet him on a dark night,’ answered the Under-secretary with a smile. ‘But perhaps, after all, the man is only some sailor newly paid off; though he has a reckless unpleasant look in any case.’

Perceiving himself to be an object of attention to the occupants of the school-room window, the rough fellow who had been lingering at the gate now turned on his heel, and with an air half-defiant, half-abashed, slunk away.

Nor was it long before the old Earl and his guest, with an urbane word or two of leave-taking to the pretty teacher, quitted the school, and re-entered the carriage, which had been awaiting them in the leafy lane beyond. Lord Wolverhampton, as the horses' heads were turned towards High Tor, looked and felt pleased. He took an interest in the schools, as he did in every detail of his property; and he had been anxious for the Under-secretary's approbation concerning them. The Right Hon. Stephen Hammond had, in the course of the tour which he was

hurriedly making through the country, visited many such places of education, probably with a view to Hansard and Blue-books; but he was frankly willing to give its meed of praise to that of which his noble host was the patron. And praise from Mr Hammond was worth the having.

The carriage rolled on between high banks crested with hazels and gay with wild-flowers, until at last it passed between the sturdy gateposts of blue Cornish granite, topped by the grim heraldic monsters which the De Veres had borne on their shields in battle for many a year before they had become possessed of the ancient barony of Harrogate or the modern earldom of Wolverhampton. It was a pretty park enough that of High Tor, with its huge sycamores and avenue of wych-elms, the fallow-deer feeding peacefully among the ancient hawthorn trees, the tinkling trout-stream, and the lofty crag that stood forth like a giant sentinel, as though to protect the mansion itself, surrounded by its gardens and shrubberies.

‘Those are fine beeches!’ observed Mr Hammond, pointing to a clump of silvan Titans that reared their canopy of leaves on a hill far away.

‘Ah!’ said the Earl, as a momentary shade passed across his face; ‘those are not on my land. They are on the other side of the ring-fence, and belong to Sir Sykes, at Carbery Chase.’

‘It was all one property once, I think?’ said Mr Hammond.

‘Yes; but that was a long time ago,’ rejoined the Earl; but he did not enlarge upon the subject, and the carriage rolled in silence

along the well-kept road towards the house.

Meanwhile the man whose loitering near the school of High Tor had attracted some notice, had cleared the village, and was traversing one of those deep lanes, with high banks densely wooded, for which that southern county is famous. The nut boughs almost interlaced their slender branches over his head as he passed beneath their shadow, and the ferns grew so thickly that it was but here and there, in golden patches, that the broken sunbeams could filter through them. The wayfarer was, however, to judge from appearances, by no means one of those for whom the coy beauty of wild-flowers, or the soft greenery of the woodlands, or the carol of the birds, could have any peculiar attraction. He pushed on, not hurrying his pace, but moodily indifferent to the hundred pretty sights and sounds that vainly invited his attention.

In person the stranger was, as has been mentioned, powerfully built, and still active and vigorous, although his crisp dark hair was grizzled by age or hardship. His keen restless eyes, sullen mouth, and lowering looks, were scarcely calculated to inspire confidence. His sunburnt face had evidently known the heat of a fiercer sun than that of Britain; and near the corner of the mouth there was a dull white scar, half-hidden by the clustering beard. Mr Hammond's conjecture as to the seafaring character of the man was perhaps warranted by his attire, which was of a coarse blue pilot-cloth, such as is worn not by sailors only, but by many dwellers on the coast, whose calling leads them to associate with

mariners; and as regarded his bearing, he might as easily have been taken for an Australian digger or Cornish miner as for a seaman.

Such as he was, Ethel Gray was right in saying that this man's darkling face had been very frequently to be seen in the village of High Tor during the few weeks of her residence there. Who he was or whence he came, no one knew. But he did nothing illegal in loitering about the trim straggling street; and as our modern system does not encourage rural Dogberries to meddle with suspected 'vagrom men,' he was left practically unmolested as he lounged to and fro, talking little, but listening much in the tap-room of the village ale-house, where the rustics recognised in him the merit of one who carried spare silver in his pocket, and would invest a little of it in eleemosynary pots of beer. Himself not over-communicative, he seemed to have an aptitude for making others talk; and if to learn the politics of the parish was his desire, he certainly ought to have become tolerably well versed in them.

The swarthy slouching fellow trudged on, indifferent to the pale blush of the wild-roses, to the scent of the violets, or to the fresh clear song of the blackbird. He was thinking, thinking deeply, perceptibly indeed, had any one been there to watch him, for the veins and muscles of his beetling brows swelled and rose frowningly, as they do with some men while racking their brains. Presently he emerged into a broader and drier road than the moist shady lane which he had traversed, and saw before him the lodge-

gates of a park, the stone piers of which were surmounted by a pair of couchant greyhounds in marble. One of the side-gates stood always open, since there exists an ancient right of way through Carbery Chase; and unchallenged, the stranger passed through the gateway and entered the demesne. It was a fair scene on which he looked. The golden sunshine fell, as if lovingly, on the rustling beech-trees and spreading oaks, the ferny dells and grassy uplands, the ancient trees of the grand avenue, and the bold blue swell of Dartmoor rising bleakly to the northward.

Full in front, seen through a vista of lofty elms, was the great house, rising stately in its fair proportions; mullion and ogive, and gable and turret, and every detail, to the very vanes that flashed and glittered on roof and tower, looking very much as they must have looked when Queen Elizabeth deigned to shew her skill as an archeress, to the detriment of the dappled deer in the wide park beyond. The silver-plumaged swans yet rode the tranquil waters of the mere, the burnished pheasants exhibited their gaudy feathers on the sunny bank beneath the fir-spinny, and the peacocks swept their gorgeous trains along the stone terrace that skirted the house, as when Tudor royalty had been feasted there.

It is seldom in England that two mansions of pretensions equal to High Tor and Carbery Court lie so near together. But in point of splendour there could be no comparison between the two. The grand Elizabethan house, justly described in the red-bound county guide-book as 'a magnificent place, now the seat of Sir

Sykes Denzil, Bart.,' far surpassed in size and in symmetry the smaller and older dwelling of Sir Sykes's noble neighbour. No one would have credited the sunburnt stranger with any great share of artistic taste or architectural interest, yet he stood still at an angle of the road whence he could command an uninterrupted view of Carbery Court, and shading his eyes with his broad hand, gazed at it with an intentness that was not a little remarkable. 'A tidy crib!' he muttered at last. 'No wonder if a chap would run a bit of risk, and pitch overboard any ballast in the way of scruples, to be owner of such a place as that. And yet' —

He snapped his fingers contemptuously as he spoke, but nevertheless broke off abruptly in his soliloquy, and drawing out from the breast-pocket of his rough coat a leathern tobacco-pouch and a short clay pipe, filled and lighted the latter, and leaning against the huge bole of an elm-tree, smoked for some time in silence. But if his outspoken self-communings had come to an end, it would seem that the train of thought which had suggested them had sustained no interruption, to judge by the stealthy glances which he cast now and again towards the grand mansion, flanked as it was by all the appliances of wealth — park and lake and gardens, home-farm and stabling, pheasantry, and paddocks where thoroughbred colts disported themselves during the brief period of liberty that precedes the education of such equine aristocrats.

A stray policeman passing by would probably have set down the swarthy stranger as an intending burglar taking a distant

survey of the scene of his projected operations; but the mixture of emotions which the man's callous face expressed was of by far too complex a character to be summed up in so commonplace a fashion. There was covetousness to be sure, and perhaps a spice of malignity; but what appeared to predominate was a species of cynical enjoyment of the thinker's own cunning, not unusual with crafty but uneducated persons, who see themselves on the brink of success. Whatever might be the nature of the man's meditations, they were presently cut short by the sound of hoofs on the smooth road near him, as a gentleman riding slowly from the lodge-gates towards the house came in sight.

As the rider approached him, the man, who had been leaning against the tree, started, and with an impatient gesture, knocked the ashes out of his exhausted pipe; then jerking down his hat over his brows with the air of one whose instinct or purpose it is to shun observation, he strode off, striking into a side-road which led towards another gate of the park, by which entrance could be made from the northward. Some minutes of brisk walking brought him to the verge of the park, whence he emerged into a wild and broken district of imperfectly cultivated country lying at the foot of the Dartmoor uplands, that rolled away in front of him to the edge of the horizon.

For some half a mile beyond the park-wall, the well-tilled fields, the fences in good repair, and the trim aspect of the few dwellings that studded the country, differed in no respect from such fields and fences, such farms and cottages as lay between

High Tor and Carbery. But when the pedestrian reached a guide-post the pointing finger of which was inscribed with the words, 'To Nomansland, Dedman's Hollow, and Dartmoor,' he began to see before him evidences that he had left behind him the carefully managed Carbery property, and had entered on a barren region skirting the Royal Forest, and inhabited by a race of squatters who wrested with difficulty a bare subsistence from the sterile soil.

Passing on amid the ragged hedges, the lean cattle, squalid children, and tumble-down hovels of this unattractive population, but acknowledging twice or thrice a half-sullen nod or growl of recognition on the part of some male member of the community who stood whistling or chewing a straw at gate or gap, the wayfarer at last reached a spot where, at the junction of four narrow lanes, stood a dilapidated house of entertainment, its thatched roof stained and broken, and with not a few of the panes in its unwashed windows rudely replaced by boards or sackcloth. An inscription in faded letters over the low-browed doorway had reference to a license to retail beer and spirits for consumption on the premises, and tobacco; while a board nailed to a dead tree hard by bore, in thin black characters, the name of *The Traveller's Rest*. And into *The Traveller's Rest* the stranger dived, with all the air of one who feels himself at home.

CURLING

When a black frost seals up the ground, and ice covers our ponds and lochs, among the amusements then open to those north of the Tweed there is none more healthful and exhilarating than the game of curling, the mode of playing at which we shall presently explain for the benefit of our non-initiated readers. This ‘manly Scottish exercise,’ as the old poet Pennycuick calls it, is, as we once before hinted, the worthiest rival of golf in Scotland. Alas, however, it fights this battle under immense disadvantages; the good old times seem to have passed away, when for weeks on end, and good ice might be confidently counted on for a long time. But being a pastime solely depending upon ice, and good ice, for its existence, this only makes the ardent votaries of the game the more eager to take every advantage of such fleeting chances as the variable winters of our day send them. Night has often been added to day, when the interest in a great match has been more intense than the frost, and the ice has shewn any signs of passing away.

O'er burn and loch the warlock Frost
A crystal brig would lay,

It is *always* a trial for a curler to see a sheet of ice unoccupied; and when, on a Sunday, the ‘crystal brig’ on some fine loch lies

smooth and keen, who has not seen hopeful enthusiasts taking a glance at the virgin expanse, with expression of countenance impossible to misunderstand! The marvel is that the strong temptation is so universally resisted, and that no effect has followed the example set by that Bishop of Orkney two centuries ago, whose ‘process,’ says Baillie in his Letters, ‘came before us; he was a curler on the Sabbath-day.’

No game promotes sociality more than curling; none unites on one common platform the different classes of society better than it does.

The tenant and his jolly laird,
The pastor and his flock,

join in the game without patronage on one side or any loss of respect on the other. Harmony and friendly feeling prevail; and if, on the ice as elsewhere, all men are *not* equal, it is because a quick eye, a sound head, and a steady hand make now the shepherd, now the laird, ‘king o’ a’ the core.’

Though so eminently a Scottish game, evidence goes to prove that the pastime was brought to us from the continent not very long ago – three hundred years or so. Some ultra-patriotic curlers claim for it indeed a native origin, or at least one lost in the mists of antiquity, citing a passage in *Ossian* to prove that the Fingalian heroes beguiled their winters with the game, because in one passage it is said ‘Swaran bends at the stone of might;’ but

this notwithstanding, it is quite clear that, as in the case of golf, we are indebted to outsiders for the first rough sketches of the 'roaring game.' The technical language of the game is all of Low Country origin, and it is supposed to have been introduced into this country by the Flemish emigrants who settled in Scotland about the end of the fifteenth century. No mention of it is made by any writer for long after this; but it must have been well known in 1607, for Camden, in his *Britannia*, published in that year, says that in the little island of Copinsha, near the Orkneys, 'are to be found in great plenty excellent stones for the game called curling.'

At this time and for long after, the game appears to have been merely a rough kind of quoiting on ice; indeed for a great part of the last century its common name in this country was *Kuting*. The stones of that day, rough undressed blocks – so different from the polished missiles now used – had no handle, but merely a kind of hollow or niche for the finger and thumb, and were evidently intended to be *thrown* for at least part of the course. Since these days, great strides have been taken in the improvement of the game; now it is highly scientific, and with its many delicate strokes, its 'wicks,' calculations of angles, of force, and of bias, it may without presumption be called the billiards of ice. In some places, however, the old game with its primitive implements, usually flattish stones from the bed of the nearest stream, still holds its place under the name of 'channelling.'

In the bead-roll of curling are no such mighty names as those

that golf boasts of; our winter game has not got mixed up with historic events and personages, as the older pastime has; but what her devotees lack in greatness is made up by the intense affection shewn by them in all ages for their favourite sport. It appears to have been a great game with poets. Allan Ramsay and Burns allude to it, and a host of minor bards have sung its praises at varying lengths, but with uniform appreciation of its excellences. One of the most eloquent passages in Christopher North's *Winter Rhapsody* deplores the failing popularity of the game in his later days; for like many other good things, curling has had its ups and downs in this world. In some few districts where it once flourished for a time, the interest in the game has died out; but of later years the establishment of so many clubs has given a new impetus to the game, which now prospers in its season beyond all former experience. The south-western districts of Scotland were long the chosen home of curling, and the players of Lanark and Dumfriesshire were specially renowned for their great skill in the art; but now it has spread over the whole country, and the grand matches of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club witness the friendly rivalry of worthy foemen from Maidenkirke to John o' Groat's, and excite the enthusiasm of branch clubs south of the Tweed, and even across the Atlantic.

At Edinburgh, perhaps as much as at any other place, has the game prospered within the last century, though in one point the game has lost a recognition it once had, if we believe the old tradition that, about a hundred and fifty years ago, the Town-

Council used to go to the ice in all the pomp and circumstance that it now reserves for the Commissioner's procession, with a band playing 'appropriate airs' before it, which discoursed sweet music while the fathers of the city gave an hour or two to the game. The citizens then played on the Nor' Loch, a sheet of water which in those days divided the Old Town from the New; when it was drained they went to the ponds at Canonmills, and subsequently to Duddingston Loch, where arose the Duddingston Curling Club, instituted in 1795, which has done great things in infusing a new spirit into the game. Among its members have been many fine curlers and good fellows, famed in other fields than this; and even if the Club had done nothing beyond giving us the capital songs of Sir Alexander Boswell, Miller, and many others, it would have still deserved well of its country.

Of late years, however, there has arisen a mightier than it – the Royal Caledonian Curling Club – now forty years old, which numbers among its members most curlers of note, both at home and abroad; and to which are affiliated all the local societies, who once a year, when the weather permits, send their chosen champions to contend at the grand match held under the auspices of the Royal Club.

Let us now see how the game is played; and first we shall give what is perhaps the earliest description of the game on record, that given by Pennant in his *Tour* in 1792. 'Of all the sports of these parts,' he says, 'that of curling is the favourite, and one unknown in England. It is an amusement of the winter, and

played on the ice by sliding from one mark to another great stones of from forty to seventy pounds weight, of a hemispherical form, with an iron or wooden handle at the top. The object of the player is to lay his stone as near the mark as possible, to guard that of his partner, which had been well laid before, or to strike his antagonist's.'

The game is played on a carefully chosen piece of ice called the 'rink,' which should be forty-two yards long, unless special circumstances – such as thaw and consequently 'dull' ice – require it to be shortened. This piece of ice should be as level, smooth, and free from cracks as possible; there is usually a trifling bias, which however to the skilled curler rather adds interest to the game, as it calls forth additional science in the play.

When the rink is chosen, a little mark is made at each end; this is called the 'tee;' and near that point stands, in his turn, each player, whose object is to hurl or slide his stones to the opposite end, by a swinging motion of the arm. Each player also endeavours to place his stones nearer the tee than those of his opponents. In this respect curling is precisely similar in principle to the well-known game of bowls. Round the tees are scratched several concentric circles or 'broughs,' a foot or so apart from each other, by which means the distance at which stones are lying from the goal is seen at a glance at any time during the continuance of the 'end.' In the normally long rink, a scratch called the hog-score – usually made wavy, to distinguish it from any accidental crack – is drawn across the line of play near each

end, eight yards from the tee; and any stones that have not had impetus enough imparted to them to carry them over this line are 'hogs,' and are put off the ice as useless for that end. A common number of players in one rink is eight – four against four; but in some places more play on one side, and in others less, according to circumstances. As a general rule each man plays two stones. The game is counted by points; and each stone of a side closer than their antagonists' nearest, is a point which scores towards the game. It will be observed that 'tees,' 'broughs,' and 'hog-scores' are in duplicate, for as in quoits and bowls, ends are changed after each round.

As in bowls so in curling, the office of 'skip' of each side is usually given to the best player; and on his tact and judgment, besides knowledge of the exact amount of confidence he can place on the skill of each of his followers depends much of the success of his side. His chief duty is to stand at the tee for the purpose of directing and advising the play of each of his fellows, always playing last himself, that the critical shot on which perhaps victory or defeat hangs, may be in the best possible hands. Thus, in a rink of four players a side, the skips stand directors until their third men have played both their stones; upon which they proceed to the other end and play theirs.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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