

THE CHANNINGS.

CHAPTER I.

THE INKED SURPLICE.

THE sweet bells of Helstonleigh Cathedral were ringing out in the summer's afternoon. Groups of people lined the streets, more than the customary business of the day would have brought forth; some pacing with idle steps, some halting to talk with one another, some looking in silence towards a certain point, as far as the eye could reach; all waiting in expectation.

It was the first day of Helstonleigh Assizes; that is, the day on which the courts of law began their sittings. Generally speaking, the commission was opened at Helstonleigh on a Saturday; but for some convenience of the arrangements of the circuit, it was fixed this week for Wednesday; and when those cathedral bells burst forth, they gave the signal that the judges had arrived, and were entering the sheriff's carriage, which had gone out to meet them.

A fine sight, carrying in it much of majesty was the procession, as it passed through the streets, with its slow and stately steps; and although Helstonleigh saw it twice a year, it looked on it with gratified eyes still, and made the day into a sort of holiday. The trumpeters rode first, blowing the proud note of advance, and the long line of well-mounted javelin men came next, two abreast; their attire being that of the fine livery of the high sheriff's family, and their javelin's held in rest. Sundry officials followed, and the governor of the county gaol sat in an open carriage, his long white wand raised in the air. Then appeared the beautiful, closed equipage of the sheriff, its four horses caparisoned with silver, pawing the ground, for they chafed at the slow pace to which they were restrained. In it, in their scarlet robes and flowing wigs, carrying awe to many a spectator, sat the judges; the high sheriff was opposite to them, and his chaplain by his side, in his gown and bands. A crowd of gentleman, friends of the sheriff, followed on horseback, and a mob of ragamuffins brought up the rear.

To the assize courts the procession took its way, and there the short business of opening the commission was gone through, when the

judges re-entered the carriage to proceed to the cathedral, having been joined by the mayor and corporation. The melodious bells of Helstonleigh were still ringing out, not to welcome the judges to the city now, but as an invitation to them to come and worship God. Inside the grand entrance of the cathedral, waiting to receive the judges, stood the dean of Helstonleigh, two of the minor canons, and the king's scholars and choristers, all in their white robes. The bells ceased; the fine organ pealed out—and there are few finer organs in England than that of Helstonleigh—the vergers with their silver maces, and the decrepit old bedesmen with their black gowns, led the way to the choir, the long scarlet trails of the judges being held up behind; and places were found for all.

The Rev. John Pye began the service; it was his week for chanting. He was one of the senior minor canons, and the head-master of the college school. At the desk opposite him sat the Rev. William Yorke, a young man who had but just gained his minor canonry.

The service went on smoothly until the commencement of the anthem. In one sense it went on smoothly to the end, for no one present, not even the judges themselves, could see that anything was wrong. Mr. Pye was what was called 'chanter' to the cathedral, which meant that it was he who had the privilege of selecting the music for the chants and other portions of the service, when the dean did not do so himself. The anthem he had put up for this occasion was a very good one, taken from the Psalms of David. It commenced with a treble solo; it was, moreover, an especial favorite of Mr. Pye's; and he composed himself complacently to listen.

But no sooner was the symphony over, no sooner had the first notes of the chorister sounded on Mr. Pye's ear, than his face slightly flushed, and he raised his hand with a sharp, quick gesture. *That* was not the voice which ought to have sung this fine anthem; that was a cracked, *passé* voice, which belonged to the senior chorister, a young gentleman of seventeen, who was going out of the choir at Michaelmas. He had done good service for the choir in his day, but his voice was breaking now; and the last time he had