

"I went up to the cavalry barracks," answered the young man boldly, "and asked one of the troop sergeant-majors a few questions about enlistment. Anything would be preferable to the dog's life I lead here."

For an instant the squire was almost speechless with rage, but at length his anger found vent.

"And do you mean to say you have thought of enlisting, without even condescending to ask me?" stammered he at length.

"I have not only thought of it, but am still going to," replied Leonard. "You are always grumbling about the expense I am to you, and besides I am over age and can do what I like to earn an honest livelihood."

Had this been the only grievance which the squire had against his son, it may be that the young man's bold demeanour might have claimed the day; unfortunately, however, there was something more in the background.

"And where did you go to after your conversation with the red-coated butcher?" demanded he.

Leonard gazed steadily at his father, but made no reply.

"I can tell you," roared the squire. "You went to old Chamberlayne, the lying thief who said that I was an unnatural father because I kept you here to work honestly, and did not send you off to college to fool away more money in a month than I spend in a year. That's where you went, isn't it?"

Still Leonard remained silent, and after a short pause his father continued:

"And I'll tell you why you went to the villain's house; it was to dangle after that fine stuck-up minx of a daughter of his, Ella Chamberlayne. Do you think I haven't enough to do to keep two paupers, but am going to let you bring another one here; not I, my lad; your old father is not such a fool as that by a long way."

Still not a word from Leonard, though the colour which rose to his cheeks and forehead showed that the last shaft had penetrated his armour of impenetrability which he had donned for the encounter.

"A rare young fool you must be," sneered the squire, enraged by the young man's silence, "to go running after a girl who has flirted with every officer in the barracks, and has only picked up with a boy like you because better men have flung her over."

"Stop!" exclaimed Leonard, in a voice so utterly passionate that his father hardly recognized it. "Stop! I do not permit any one to speak disrespectfully of Miss Chamberlayne in my presence."

"You do not permit," sneered the squire. "A mighty fine fellow you have become all of a sudden. What do you intend to do, eh?"

"As you are unhappily my father," retorted Leonard "I have no alternative except to quit your presence, but I tell you I wish to heaven the relationship to cease between us, for then—oh then—"

"Don't let that stand in your way, you swaggering young fire-eater," exclaimed the squire, placing himself so as to prevent his son's leaving the room. "I am able to take care of myself, and I tell you again, your Ella Chamberlayne is a—"

Before the abusive epithet could cross his lips, Leonard had grasped him by the collar and sent him whirling across the room until he was brought up by the opposite wall, and then turning round, he boldly faced the infuriated man with his flashing eyes and heaving chest, which showed how deeply he resented the insult offered to the woman upon whom he had set his affections.

With an absolute howl of rage the squire sprang at his son; he had a heavy dog-whip in his hand, scarcely knowing what he did, he lashed the young man sharply across the face, a livid scar rising at once where the stroke had fallen. Before he could realize what had taken place, Leonard seized him with a grip of iron, pinioned him with one hand, and with the other tearing the whip from his hand, tore it to pieces, and sent the fragments into the scanty fire upon the hearth, then with a look of dignified reproach he left the room, and resumed his old position on the doorstep. He had hardly done so, when Sam Baxter, the keeper, came up, and touching his hat, asked if the squire was going to shoot the home covert that day.

"He is in his room;" asked him," returned Leonard, laconically.

So unaccustomed was the keeper to receive a curt answer from his young master, that he gazed upon him with some surprise, and for the first time caught a glimpse of the mark upon his face.

"My word, Master Leonard," said he. "What is the matter with your face, it is all broken like?"

"My father struck me," replied Leonard, coldly, "but it is the last time, he shall never raise his hand to me again. I have a way to stop that, once and for ever."

The keeper would have questioned him further, but with a motion of his hand Leonard desired him to enter the house and leave him alone. For fully a quarter-of-an-hour he was left to his own dreary meditations, when he was aroused by a squeaky voice at his elbow, and looking downwards saw a ragged looking urchin of about fourteen years of age standing beside him.

Ned Tupper was a well-known character about the farm, and usually acted as the squire's aid-de-camp, conveying messages from one part of the estate to the other. His parents had been farm labourers on the property. His father was killed by a reaping machine, and when Squire Bradeley found that the widow could not pay her rent, he evicted her on a cold winter's night, and she died of exposure and hunger in the attempt to reach some friends she had on the other side of Orpminster. Whether the squire felt that he was indirectly the cause of her death was never known for a certainty, but he took possession of the orphan lad, and gave him the run of the kitchen until he was of an age to work, when he was at once set to bird scaring and other simple labours.

The squire was always brutal to him, but the lad, who by many was not supposed to be in his right mind, followed him about with a dog-like fidelity, heedless of the kicks and blows which his presence by his master's side inevitably brought down upon him.

"Do you want me, Ned?" demanded Leonard.

"Yes," returned the boy. "Squire says as how he be agoing to shoot the home coverts, as the man up in Lunnon have sent down a big order for pheasants, and you've to look sharp."

"Very well," answered the young man, listlessly, but making no attempt to go and prepare for the day's work. "Very well, Ned, that will do."

"Better look sharp, Master Leonard," paused the urchin. "Squire be in a rare taking he be, look what he gave I for not understanding what he wanted right off," and pulling off his battered felt hat, the lad showed that his tangled hair was saturated with blood, which was flowing from a freshly inflicted cut on the top of his head. "Banged me over the nut he did with his stick," said the boy.

"I wonder you stand it, Ned," remarked Leonard, looking compassionately at the tattered figure before him. "I won't, and I am going to make an end of it to-day."

"Why, Lor' bless your 'art, Master Leonard, everybody says as how the squire be my benefactor, and that if he did kill mother by a turning her out in the snow, he tuk charge o' me an'll make a man o' me yet."

Leonard gazed for a moment at the tattered demalion before him, and then with a deep sigh turned away to make preparations for the morning's slaughter, which he could not look upon in the guise of sport. As he did so his father, followed by the keeper, came out of the house.

"Well, Leonard, boy," said the former, attempting to convert his harsh, forbidding physiognomy with a smiling face. "Let bygones be bygones. If I did clout you over the face, you give me a rare hit first, there's more pluck in you lad than I had thought. Come shake hands and be friends. You know I was a bit on the booze the past week, and the cross drop is always the last one that remains."

Leonard's face grew livid, and he made no effort to grasp the hand which his father extended towards him.

"I will never forgive you, either the insult to Miss Chamberlayne or the blow," said he, between his clenched teeth. "And to-day I will take such measures as will put it out of your power to strike me again, either with your tongue or your whip." And with these words he turned into the house to prepare for the expedition against the pheasants.

"The lad's turned vicious, eh, Sam," remarked the squire, with a short uneasy laugh. "Ah, he'll get over it in a day or two, but I ain't going to have him bringing Parson Chamberlayne's girl to roost here, not if I know it. You wait for his lordship here, and I'll get forward. My old bones ache to-day, so I'll go the other end and fur and feather as it comes out. I'm good enough for that yet. So you and the young master go through the covert along with the beaters, and mind we must have a big haul to-day, for we've a heavy order to make up. Ned, Ned Tupper you

young thief, come and bring my gun. Confound the young varment, he is never to be found when he's wanted, I'll cut his liver out when I catch him," and with these words of good omen for Master Tupper, the squire strode away in the direction of the home preserves.

After a short interval Leonard made his appearance properly equipped, and accompanied Sam Baxter to the spot where the beaters were assembled, and after a few brief words of command the preserve was entered and the butchery began.

Squire Bradeley had not uttered a vain boast when he said that he would stop anything that came out of the tangled mass of underwood. Standing about ten yards from a deep ditch, which ran round the covert, he brought down everything which came in range, and the ground near was soon covered with the victories of his well trained hand and eye. As the approach of the beaters and the shots in cover came near, he approached close to the end of the ditch, and turning his back to the copse, kept a keen watch right and left. Just then two cock pheasants came rocketing over his head, and the squire, making a magnificent right and left shot, brought them both to the ground. One, however, was not so hard hit as the other, and began slowly and painfully to flutter away in the direction of a small brook, which ran at right-angles to the plantation. The squire, who had now reloaded his gun, noticed this, and, laying his fowling piece upon the edge of the ditch, hastened after the winged bird. He had hardly gone ten yards, however, than a sound like a double shot was heard, and with a deep groan Squire Bradeley fell forward upon his face and lay motionless upon the turf, which soon began to be crimsoned with his blood.

There had been warm work in the covert previous to this, and Leonard and Sam Baxter had had no time for conversation. The cries of the beaters, the rattling of their sticks, the whining of the pheasants as they rose, and the report of the breech-loaders, formed a chaos of sounds which would have bewildered any but an experienced hand.

The line of beaters had now nearly reached the end of the covert, and Sam Baxter, taking the opportunity of a momentary lull, edged his way towards the young master, and said:

"I say, Master Leonard, if I were you I'd make it up with the squire. I never saw him so meek and mild afore. Now that you have shown him that you have a spark of the devil in you, depend on it, he won't tread you down as he has done."

"I will never make it up with him," cried Leonard fiercely, "and I tell you, Baxter, that to-day will see the end of this tyranny."

As he finished this ambiguous sentence, a hare started from a hillock of grass, and made its way towards the end of the covert. Leonard pointed his gun at it.

"Stop, for Heavens sake, cried the keeper. "Your father is just at the other side of the hedge."

The caution came too late, for the report rang out, but the hare bounded away unscathed. It was the first shot Leonard Bradeley had missed that day.

The little party soon emerged from the plantation, and the first object which met their eyes was the body of the master of Brayley Grange, stretched prone upon the ground. Every care was at once bestowed upon him, but it was only too evident that life was extinct, and Sam Baxter, though he said nothing, could not forbear casting a meaning glance upon his young master.

Leonard Bradeley's face, however, was impassible; he said little, but the orders he gave were clear and concise. A neighbouring gate was taken off its hinges, a few coats laid on it, and upon this the dead body was placed, and the sad procession took its way back to the Grange. The affair was a very puzzling one; the dead man had been shot in the back of the spine, and death must have been instantaneous. From the position of the wound it was impossible that it could have been self-inflicted, besides, his gun was found lying upon the edge of the ditch undischarged. People began to talk and shake their heads. Farm labourers are prone to gossip, and a climax was put to the affair by Ned Tupper innocently remarking that perhaps after all it was as well the old squire had died, for Master Leonard had threatened to do for him. When pressed to explain what he meant by this statement, he repeated the words Leonard had made use of more than once, that he would take such steps that day as would prevent his father insulting or striking him again.