



THE WALKERTON LACROSSE CLUB.

## THE WEDDING RING.

By ROBERT BUCHANAN.

Author of "THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD," "GOD AND THE MAN," "STORMY WATERS," ETC., ETC.

It seemed to Mr. Bream's excited fancy that Stokes took an unconscionably long while to read this short paragraph. When at last he raised his head, his twisted face was as impassive as a stone wall. As for his eyes, there was never anything to be learned from them—not even in the direction in which they were looking. He said nothing, but waited for the clergyman to speak again.

"Is that true?" said Mr. Bream again.

"It's given here as a piece of news," Stokes answered. "I don't see why it shouldn't be."

"Were you ever in that place? Did you know either of those men?"

"I knew them both," he answered, after a moment's pause.

"Were you at this place, Yuam, when the affray happened?"

"No, I was in New York; that's where I saw the report. It's cut out of the *New York Sentinel*, June 5, 18—" He pointed to the date, written in his own rude characters, below the paragraph.

"You knew O'Mara?"

"Not by that name; Mordaunt was what he called himself!"

"How do you know then that this was the man?"

"Because I was with him in a bar in St. Louis; a man came up to him and called him O'Mara. Mordaunt stuck the man out as he'd made a mistake. He was an Englishman, so was Mordaunt."

"Could you describe him?"

"Tallish chap; good-looking; very swell way of speaking. Used a lot of crack-jaw words. Played the fiddle and the pianner beautiful."

"Will you lend me this book for an hour or two, Stokes? Say till to-morrow morning?"

"Certainly, sir," said Stokes, closing the volume and handing it to him, "keep it as long as you like, sir."

"I knew the unfortunate man," said Mr. Bream, "he has relatives in England who know nothing of his death. I will ask you, Stokes, to be so good as to say nothing of our conversation. It is a painful story and I don't want it talked about."

"I'm mum, sir," said Stokes, "there's nobody here, at all events, as I'm likely to talk to about it."

"True," said Mr. Bream.

He left the house with the book under his arm. He said he was going home when he came in," said Stokes, to himself, as he watched the curate's rapidly lessening figure along the village street.

"That ain't his way home. He seemed knocked all acock by it. He asks me not to talk about it. What's in the wind, now, I wonder?"

### CHAPTER X.

AFTER SEVEN YEARS.

Bream, with Stokes' book of scraps hugged under his arm and seeming to communicate an electric tingle under his whole frame, strode along the village street into the lane beyond, walking at his most rapid rate until he came in sight of the red brick chimneys of Crouchford Court. He slackened his pace there to recover his breath, and wipe away the thick perspiration which his rapid walking had brought to his face. He was in such a condition of nervous tremor, as few men of his splendid physical condition seldom know, and it required a strong effort to quiet the trembling of his hands, and to compose his features to their usual calm.

Barbara answered his ring, and replied to his enquiry that Mrs. Dartmouth was at home. She led him to the breakfast-room, and left him to announce his arrival, returning with the message that her mistress would see him directly.

"How is your brother-in-law progressing?" he asked her.

"He's mending, sir, slowly. Doctor says as he ought to be all right again in a week or two. My

lady is going to find him work on the farm, when he's well enough to take it."

"He seems to have something on his mind," said Bream. "His illness is much more mental than physical. Whatever it is, he refuses to talk of it."

"He's told me, sir," said Barbara. With a reticence natural under the circumstance, she said no more than that he was grieving for her sister, his wife, who had died a year ago. Mrs. Dartmouth, entering at that moment released her from further question and she left the room.

Bream found himself in a situation which most of us have known at some time or other, the possession of a piece of news he knew must be welcome but requiring considerable delicacy in the fashion of its conveyance. To gain time he opened with some stereotyped commonplace, and Mrs. Dartmouth answering on the same lines, found himself floundering dismally, and feeling it more and more difficult with every passing moment to disclose the real object of his visit. His uneasiness was too pronounced to miss Mrs. Dartmouth's observation.

"You seem agitated, Mr. Bream. No bad news, I hope of your parishioners?"

"Oh, none! Things are going splendidly." He stopped short, and then, taking his courage a *deux mains*, plunged at the communication he had to make.

"I have learned a thing this afternoon, which closely concerns you," he said. "It concerns you so closely, it is of such vital importance, that I scarcely know how to approach it. I am afraid that it will be something of a shock to you."

She went a shade paler than usual, but it was with perfect quiet that she bade him proceed.

"You will remember that on my first meeting with you how we spoke of—of your husband. She went paler still, and her breathing quickened. "I have news of him." There was so unmistakable a look of fear and horror in her face that he hurried on, blurring out his communication crudely, almost brutally. "You are free. He will never trouble you again."