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THE HEIR OF WILTON PLACE.

CHAPTER I.

MANY years have elapsed since a hoary pile, long since gone to decay, which we will designate by the fictitious name of Seaford Castle, crowned a steep and bold headland on the western coast of Great Britain. This eminence, when seen from the water, presented a wild, irregular mass of rocks, apparently piled together during some convulsion of nature, and their base being constantly lashed by a heavy surge, that sent up showers of spray over their dark and weather-beaten sides, the whole formed a picture of wild and gloomy grandeur—especially in the dim twilight or the rays of an unclouded moon, highly impressive to the imagination. There was no point, owing to the abruptness of the coast, near the foundations of the castle, where a boat could have effected a landing, even when the winds were at rest, and the ocean was calm, but on the southerly side of this sea-beaten promontory there was a small cave of clear, smooth water, capable of sheltering half a dozen fishing boats at a time. The coast here, as on the opposite side of the promontory, was bold and abrupt, except at the head of the cave, where there was a strip of hard, smooth beach, and on which the water broke in silvery ripples, even the shrill whistle of the sea-blast could be distinctly heard in the distance. Many a broad acre, subject to the most skilful husbandry of the time, with plenty of pasturage, besides forest and park, made the estate of Lord Seaford the most valuable in the country, if we except that of his nearest neighbour, Sir Andrew Wilton. The more comfortable, though less imposing mansion of the latter was situated on a spot less elevated, sheltered from the chilling sea breeze by a thick grove of evergreens, so that when the wind

was howling round the corners of the castle with a fury that might have endangered a less massive structure, the more humble edifice was snugly reposing beneath, like a bird in its comfortable nest.

Lord Seaford had always entertained the warmest friendship for Sir Andrew, and when visited by his last illness, he requested him to write to his son, who had been absent on the Continent several years, to hasten home. He obeyed the summons, but did not reach home till his parent had been dead several weeks.—There had, from time to time, been vague rumours, during his absence, that he was engaged in wild and lawless adventures, but on his return, all were eager to welcome the son and successor of one so esteemed and beloved as the late Lord Seaford.

In stature, he was below the middling height, and naturally of a complexion femininely fair, though, at present, somewhat sunburnt. His features, like his complexion, were handsome and delicate as a beautiful woman's, shaded with soft hair of a bright golden color; a style of beauty, which, while it took the fancy of the fair and the younger portion of the community, caused several of the older dames to shake their heads, and whisper among themselves that it was no good sign for one of the bolder sex to have the small and delicate features of a gentlewoman, and that he would one day show himself to be a kite in the dove's plumage. There was nothing, however, in his deportment to warrant such a prediction, he being in every respect irreproachable. There was a frankness in his manners, either real or pretended, that at times approached to bluntness, in his intercourse with his own sex, while towards the other, he assumed an affability and deference, equally winning and flattering.

Sir Andrew Wilton had an only daughter, a sweet, fairy like creature, who at the time of