

# The Trumpet.

"PLEDGED TO TEMPERANCE, LIBERTY AND LAW."

VOL. 1.

SYDNEY, C B., MAY 2, 1870.

NO. 14.

## Literature.

### A VERY NARROW ESCAPE.

It was not quite a year since Mr. George Hartfield, the leading solicitor in the market town of Norbury, had returned from his honeymoon tour, bringing with him the prettiest little wife that the good old town had boasted for a long time. George was only thirty years of age, but his wife looked a mere girl, and was at least eleven years his junior; much to the disgust of more mature damsels, who would have been willing to step into proprietorship of the good-looking young lawyer and his grim, conspicuous old house, which was one of the most respectable dwellings in the upper and more rural part of the High street. Mr. Hartfield had inherited an excellent business from his father, and was altogether a person of some importance in the opinion of the Norbury world at large, and of himself in particular.

The wife was a shy, girlish creature, who seemed scarcely fit to be mistress of that big, formal house, with its shining wainscoted walls and grim old furniture—furniture that had been fashionable in the days of George's grandfather—gloomy old mahogany four-posters and walnut-wood presses, in the polished panels whereof sentimental little Alice Hartfield, whose head was a kind of branch station of the circulating library, used to fancy she saw ghosts in the gloaming. In honest truth she did not take much to the house in High street, and looked back with fond regretfulness to the bright country home from which George had won her; but Mr. Hartfield being of an arbitrary temper, and convinced that the old house was perfection, she had never ventured to hint her dislike. It must be owned that the evenings were long and dull for so girlish a matron. George Hartfield was often out—sometimes at a public dinner at the Crown Hotel, sometimes at the social club held at the same prosperous tavern, sometimes playing billiards with bachelor clients—all in the way of business, of course, as he told his wife; but not the less lonely on that account.

Mr. Hartfield employed three clerks; a gentlemanly young man, who was articled; a stripling, for copying and out-of-door work; and a gray-haired old man, with a face upon which there was a look of settled melancholy. Mr. Bestow, the articled clerk, and Thomas Dredger, the stripling, had christened him old Dismal, and spoke of him commonly by that disrespectful sobriquet. If he ever heard the name, it apparently troubled him very little. He rarely spoke except so far as his business required him to speak; and in the two years that he had been with Mr. Hartfield, he had not advanced by so much as one step toward intimacy with his fellow-workers. He lived three miles out of Norbury, walking to and from the office in all weathers and no one had ever seen the inside of his home.

Her first year of married life closed in sorrow and disappointment for Alice Hartfield. The baby-stranger from whose coming she had expected so much pleasure, only opened its eyes upon this world to close them again for ever. She dwelt upon this loss with a grief which seemed to her husband just a little exaggerated, and it is possible that her tears and sad looks drove him to his club at the Crown rather more often this year than in the previous winter. It was not that he was unkind or indifferent to his pretty young wife. He fancied that she was perfectly happy with her books and work and piano in the interval between six o'clock and eleven, at which hour he punctually returned to his abode, as sober as when he left home, well pleased with himself and with the world at large.

The two younger clerks commented very freely upon the solicitor's conduct in his domestic capacity.

"If I had such a pretty wife, I wouldn't leave her alone evening after evening as our governor does," remarked the stripling pertly; "I wonder he is ashamed of himself."

"He ought to take her more into society," replied Mr. Bestow, the articled clerk, "certainly," much request in that brilliant articled clerk, who was in Norbury society.

Mr. Morgan, the old clerk, looked up from his desk with a sigh.

"What,"

"my funeral friend," cried Bestow, "do you mean to say you are interested in the subject?"

"I am very much interested in Mrs. Hartfield," the old man answered quietly; "she is always kind to me. It is a good sign when a woman of her age takes the trouble to be polite to an old man like me—a sign that her heart's in the right place. I wish her husband understood her better. I don't think she wants to be taken to tea-parties, Mr. Bestow; but I do think she wants a little more sympathy."

This was a long speech for Mr. Morgan. The two younger men stared at him superciliously, and then went on with their work. From the first day of her coming to be mistress of the old house William Morgan had shown himself interested in his master's wife. He was always pleased to perform any little services for her, and seemed needlessly grateful for the smallest kindness at her hands. His way home took him the whole length of the town; and Mrs. Hartfield used to entrust him with her books to change at the circulating library, an office which he performed with much taste and discretion.

"I take the liberty to carry a volume home with me for the night at odd times," he said to her one day.

"What, Mr. Morgan, do you read novels?"

"No, madam; but I have a niece living with me who is glad to skim the volumes of an evening."

"Indeed! You never spoke of her before. Is your niece married?"

"She—she is a widow, to all intents and purposes. Her husband deserted her three years ago, and left her and her child, a boy, on my hands. But we are very happy together, I thank God!"

"The husband must have been a bad man."

"He was a most consummate scoundrel," answered the old clerk, with suppressed intensity.

"How hard it must be for you to work for all three!" said Alice.

It will be harder for the two that are left when I am gone. My niece is able to earn a little money at her needle, but very little. It is a dark look-out for the future."

One morning early in spring, Mr. Hartfield came into the office with a very dashing gentleman, a new client, who had just come into a handsome fortune by the death of old Squire Comberford of Comberford Hall, seven miles from Norbury. Edgar Comberford, the new proprietor, was a nephew of the old man, and had been a schoolfellow of George Hartfield's fifteen years before. Since that time he had disappeared from the ken of Norbury, and was supposed to have led a wild life in foreign lands. He was eminently handsome, and in high spirits at the accession to the Comberford Hall estate.

"There are the papers, title-deeds, leases, and so on," said George Hartfield, pointing to a japanned box on a shelf in the office; "do you want to see them?"

"Not I, George," answered Mr. Comberford gaily; "it is quite enough for me to know that the lands are free from mortgages, and that the rents come in briskly. The papers could not be in better hands. Hallo! what's that?"

It was Mr. Morgan, the old clerk, who had put his head in at the door of the office and suddenly withdrawn it.

"Only one of my clerks," answered George Hartfield. "Come in, Morgan!" he bawled; but the clerk did not reply, and the two young men left the office; Mr. Comberford to be introduced to his friend's wife.

He was not a little surprised by her grace and beauty, not a little fascinated by her shy, demure, and bashful manner. He stayed to dinner, and contrived to make himself eminently agreeable to both. He had to give an animated account of his host and hostess, during the last two years of his adventures in Mexico.

"I should never have come home from there, George, but for my uncle's death," he said. "I was thoroughly die when I left England, and meant to live and abroad."

After this social dinner, Mr. Comberford dropped in very often at his friend's house. He seemed to have some perpetual reason for securing the solicitor on business, and happened by a kind of fatality to call when the master of the house was out. Would he leave a statement of his business with a clerk? No, he would wait; and he strolled unannounced into the little sitting-room at the back of the offices, where Mrs. Hartfield spent her mornings. It was the prettiest room in the house, opening into a small garden, at the end of

which there was a narrow creek—an inlet from the pretty river that flowed through Norbury.

By and by Mr. Comberford took to approaching the house by this way. He was an expert waterman, and spent a good deal of his time on the river. So it was an easy and natural thing for him to moor his boat at the bottom of George Hartfield's garden, and step lightly on shore. He always found Alice in her sitting-room, and he found a look in her face which told him his visits were not unwelcome. Being a thorough man of the world he knew the danger of the game he was playing, nor did he yield without a struggle to the temptation that had overtaken him. Such a heart as he had was hit harder than it had been of late years.

The outside world of Norbury had not yet been awakened to the scandal of Mr. Comberford's frequent visits to the lawyer's house, nor was the lawyer himself alarmed by them; but the younger clerks were quick to remark upon the length and frequency of these morning calls, and on George Hartfield's blindness to the fact.

Edgar Comberford had been settled at the Hall for six months, when George Hartfield had occasion to go to Paris on urgent business. He had intended to take his wife with him for the trip, but the weather was sultry and oppressive, and he went alone. Mrs. Hartfield seemed very little disappointed by this change in his plans. Mr. Comberford had assured her that Paris was utterly unbearable in July. It was upon his business that George Hartfield was engaged. He went to make a settlement with a Parisian money-lender who had advanced money to the young man in the days of his insolvency, and who now put in an exorbitant claim for interest.

The first day of Mr. Hartfield's absence went by without any visit from Mr. Comberford; but in the evening, when the clerks were gone and Alice was sitting alone and very low-spirited, the peculiar sound of the boat grating against the woodwork at the bottom of the garden struck upon her ear, and brought a sudden blush into her cheeks. She looked up with a movement of surprise as Edgar Comberford came across the garden. He came in at the open window with the air of a person who had a perfect right to be there, and seated himself opposite to Alice at the little table where she was drinking tea.

"I thought you would give me a cup of tea after my row," he said, "and could not pass the creek without begging for one. I dread going home to the desolation of the Hall—dreary, empty room and a cross old house-keeper. I think I shall go back to Mexico before the year is out." Alice gave a little start.

"What!" she said "leave the Hall forever?"

"In all probability forever. A man seldom comes home again from such a place as Mexico."

"But why should you go back there—why should you be tired of the Hall so soon?"

"Why should I be tired of life altogether?—Why should I wish to run away from myself—from you?"

And then he went on to speak of his love for her, in dark hints rather than in plain words. She tried to reprove him, tried to show him that she was angry, but the attempt was a very feeble one. She could only insist that he should leave her immediately. He did leave her, but not immediately, and not till she had begged insistence into pitiful entreaty.

The boat had scarcely shot away in the twilight when the door between the sitting room and the office opened, and the old clerk, Morgan, appeared on the threshold.

"You here, Mr. Morgan!" exclaimed Alice, making a vain attempt to conceal her tears; "I thought all the clerks had gone."

"I had some letters to copy, Mrs. Hartfield. Can I do anything for you in the town to-night?"

"Nothing, thank you."

He lingered, twisting the brim of his shabby old hat round and round in his tanned wrinkled hands.

"I wish to Heaven I might speak to you freely," he said at last, "without offending or wounding you."

"About what?"

"About the man who has just left you."

"Mr. Comberford, my husband's friend?"

"Your husband's direct, dearest friend—and yours," answered the old man passionately.

"What right have you to say that?" asked Alice, trembling with indignation.

"The right given me by my knowledge of the world, and, above all, by my knowledge of Edgar Comberford."

"What knowledge can you have of Mr. Comberford? Did you ever see him before he came to this office?"

"Never; but his name is a word of dire meaning in my life. Ask him what he has done for the girl he stole away from an honorable home and left in a wretched London lodging four years ago. Ask him the fate of Bessie Raynor?"

[Continued in our next.]