

# THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL.

## VOLUME I.

### CHAPTER I.

YOU MUST PLAY YOUR CARDS VERY CAREFULLY.

It was an evening party at Mrs. Stingo's, not many years ago, that two old men and two old women were talking scandal across the whist-table that stood in an ante-chamber to the reception-room. Everybody accepted the invitations of Mrs. Stingo. She was not a lady, she was ignorant, uncultivated, and rude in her manners; but then her husband had amassed a fortune in trade, and whether honestly or dishonestly made no difference to Mrs. Stingo's acquaintances. She had a fine house and a fine carriage: wore handsome dresses and gave good suppers; and if one can get so much out of one's friends, what is the use of inquiring by what means their luxuries are gained?

Such at least was the opinion of the ladies who were playing whist in the ante-chamber. The older and uglier of the two was Lady William Nettleship, the widow of the sixth son of the Duke of Mudford, whose grand family had never taken any notice of her existence.

She was very poor and very grasping, and would stoop to the lowest devices to save a penny. Yet there were people who, on account of her title, would fawn upon her and flatter her vanity, and lend her half-crowns which she always forgot to return; and amongst the most conspicuous of these was Mrs. Runnymede, the lady who sat opposite to her. She was a stout overblown matron of fifty, whose husband, if alive, was never alluded to.

She had been cut by the larger portion of society, and was thankful, even at the expense of many half-crowns, to hang on to the skirts of any woman who bore the shadow of respectability about her. The partners with whom Lady William Nettleship and

Mrs. Runnymede were playing, were Mr Rufus Farthingale an astute little lawyer, and Colonel Crossman, a male busybody who spent all his time going from one house to another, collecting bits of scandal to retail to the fashionable press.

'I cannot believe it,' exclaimed Lady William, sharply. 'All Sir Peregrine's money to go the missing grandson Vivian Chasemore! Are you quite sure that it's true?'

She was a skinny, dried-up-looking old lady, whose features twitched incessantly with incipient paralysis. She seemed to be particularly interested in the subject in hand, for as she leaned forward to question the lawyer her head shook so as to set the gold butterflies in her cap into violent agitation.

'I am quite sure, my lady,' replied Mr. Farthingale, with a smile of secret satisfaction. 'Having enjoyed the confidence of the late Sir Peregrine for many years past, I knew of his decision long before it was made public. Besides, it is no secret. The will was read out before the whole family.'

'Well, I never heard of it before, and we are most intimate with Sir Arthur,' returned Lady William.

'Perhaps Sir Arthur does not consider it part of his duty to make his grandfather's wishes public. But it is well known amongst his friends.'

'It is the most astounding piece of news!' said Mrs. Runnymede. 'Poor Sir Arthur not to have a halfpenny of the money, unless his cousin Vivian continues missing. What does he say to it, Mr. Farthingale?'

'He seems to bear the suspense very well, Mrs. Runnymede, and takes an active interest in the search that is being made for Mr. Vivian.'

'Oh, because he is in hopes of getting proofs of his death, of course!'

'That I cannot tell you, madam; but we have the strongest reason to believe that he