

WHITELADIES.

CHAPTER I.

IT was an old manor-house, not a deserted convent, as you might suppose by the name. The conventual buildings, from which no doubt the place had taken its name, had dropped away bit by bit, leaving nothing but one wall of the chapel, now closely veiled and mantled with ivy, behind the orchard, about a quarter of a mile from the house. The lands were Church lands, but the house was a lay house, of an older date than the family who had inhabited it from Henry VIII.'s time, when the priory was destroyed, and its possessions transferred to the manor. No one could tell very clearly how this transfer was made, or how the family of Austins came into being. Before that period no trace of them was to be found. They sprang up all at once, not rising gradually into power, but appearing full-blown as proprietors of the manor, and possessors of all the confiscated lands. There was a tradition in the family of some wild tragical union of an emancipated nun with a secularised friar—a kind of repetition of Luther and his Catherine, but with results less comfortable than those which followed the marriage of those German souls. With the English convertites the issue was not happy, as the story goes. Their broken vows haunted them; their possessions, which were not theirs, but the Church's, lay heavy on their consciences; and they died early, leaving descendants with whose history a thread of perpetual misfortune was woven. The family history ran in a succession of long minorities, the line of inheritance gliding from one branch to the other, the direct thread breaking constantly. To die young, and leave orphan children behind; or to die younger still, letting the line drop and fall back upon cadets of the house, was the usual fate of the Austins of