

"A regular Count Rolf, eh? I dare say I shall stand the pumping well enough. But who is that man who has just joined the Stockleigh party?"

"That? A viper, my dear fellow; a true pest to society. That is Vere Brandon, and a bigger scoundrel I never met."

"Do you know him?"

"For my sins, I do. What is called 'knowing' one here. A mere acquaintanceship, which I take great care not to cultivate. The man is repugnant to me."

"Yet he seems well enough."

"Trust to him for appearances. He is all show; outwardly a gentleman—shame that any one should call him so—but inwardly a resolute, unscrupulous, unprincipled villain."

"I say, George, you are putting it very strong."

"Too strongly. I have done him injustice in saying he is also unprincipled—that is a slip. Vere Brandon is, on the contrary, 'a man of principle.' He looks out for himself and bites every body else."

"No improvement in the description. And is he received in society with such a character?"

"His real character being so carefully hidden by the veils of good-breeding and astuteness, Brandon is well received everywhere. He is rich, or rather said to be; clever, well-informed, a first-rate companion at a dinner-table, and a devoted slave to power, in whatever form it may appear."

"I am sure to meet him, eh?"

"Of course. This evening, probably."

"At Harcourt's?"

"Yes. Harcourt's suppers are famous for their gaiety and brilliancy, and Brandon is very intimate there."

"Will you come?"

"I had promised to put in an appearance, but now that you are of the party, I shall certainly go earlier and stay later."

"Thank you very much."

The play over, the two friends walked quietly down to Ralph