

The Vicar's Nephew; or The Orphan's Vindication

CHAPTER IV.—(Cont'd.)

His Latin Reader was lying on the table, and he took it up listlessly; one had better be doing lessons, dull and unprofitable as they were, than brooding in idleness over a secret dread. He looked through the index; bits of Cicero, bits of Horace, bits of Tacitus—all duller one than another. At last he opened the book at random, and came upon the story of Lucrèce.

He read it through, not for the first time, in the curious, detached way in which school-boys read the classics, as matters relating to the parts of speech, not to the lives of men and women. What was Lucrèce to him, or he to Lucrèce? Indeed, had the story been of his own time and race he still would not have understood much about it.

A country boy, brought up among dogs and cats and horses, he had perforce become familiar with a few elementary physiological facts; but to connect those facts with the joys and griefs of human beings had never occurred to him. A splendidly clean and wholesome body; a healthy, regular out-door life, filled with swimming and rowing, cricket and football, bird-nesting and orchard robbing, and the absorbing responsibilities which devolved upon him as captain of a gang of larks, had, at fourteen, the dense ignorance, the placid indifference, of a child of six years old.

He was in the middle of parsing a sentence when the door opened and Mrs. Raymond came in. She stood looking at him, with parted lips, quite silent, and he saw that her face was white and scared, as he remembered seeing it four years ago, when the telegram came to say that his father was drowned. He sprang up.

"Aunt Sarah!"
She spoke at last, in a quick, terrified voice.

"Go down, your uncle wants you; in the study."

There was a rushing noise in his ears as he went downstairs; something seemed to catch and hold him by the throat. He opened the study door. By the window, with their backs to him, stood the curate and Mr. Hewitt, talking earnestly together in undertones. The Vicar sat at his writing desk, his grey head bent, his face buried in both hands.

Jack looked from one to another. The fanciful terrors of the last days had slipped entirely out of his mind; evidently some dreadful news had come, and his thoughts flew, as a Cornish lad's will, to wrecks and disasters by sea. But the weather had been so fine lately, it could not be that; perhaps some one was dead. He went up to the Vicar, forgetting, for once, the long feud between them.

"Uncle, what is it?"
Mr. Raymond lifted up his face, with a look upon it that Jack had never seen before. He rose, brushing tears away from his eyes with an angry gesture, and turned slowly to the curate and schoolmaster.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have to ask your pardon for this weakness: I have loved my flock for all these years and if I have failed in my duty, God knows I am heavily punished."

"No one can blame you, sir," said the curate; "how could you or any one suspect?"
"If any one is to blame," Mr. Hewitt put in, "it is I who am so constantly with the boys."

"We are all to blame," the Vicar answered sternly; "and I most of all. I have not kept guard over Christ's lambs, and they have strayed and fallen into the pit."

He took up the Bible from his desk. "At least, gentlemen, I will do my duty now, and sift the tares from the wheat, as is commanded in God's Word. You may rest assured that I will spare this matter to the bottom, not sparing my own flesh and blood."

As the two men went silently out, he turned to his nephew with a terrible face.

"Jack," he said; "I know all." Jack stared at him blankly; the words conveyed no meaning to his mind.

"Mr. Hewitt kept his suspicions from me," the Vicar went on, in the same hard, monotonous voice, "until he had proof. This morning he held an enquiry at the school, and several of your accomplices have already confessed. As soon as we know all the details, the boys found to be guilty will be expelled. As for the man you dealt with, he has been arrested and is now in Truro jail. How long have you been spreading this poison among your school-fellows?"

Jack put up a hand to his forehead. "I . . . I don't understand," he said at last.

"You don't understand. . . . The Vicar broke off, and opened a drawer in his desk. "If it were safe for me to add to your damnation by useless lies, there is the knife you stole and sold, and there is what you bought with it."

He flung the Bishop's knife on the table, and beside it a large envelope. "You see," he added with a kind of

dreary scorn: "you may as well confess at once."

Until now Jack's mind had been an utter blank; but here, at least, was something definite and tangible. He picked up the envelope; its contents, whatever they might be, would show him of what he was accused.

He drew out of it first a little book, villainously printed on bad paper, and glanced at the title. It was in English, but might as well have been in Chinese, for all he understood of it. Shaking his head, with a hopeless sense of living in a nightmare, he took out the remaining contents of the envelope, a set of colored photographs. He looked them over, one by one, first in sheer amazement, then, as some conception of their meaning gradually forced itself upon his understanding, with speechless, breathless horror; and suddenly flung them down in a panic of furious disgust.

"What is it? Uncle, I don't understand. Oh, what are they all for?" The Vicar's smothered rage blazed up uncontrollably. He wheeled round in a flash, and sent the boy staggering backwards with a violent blow in the face.

"Is this a play-house?" he cried. "Am I to have hypocrisy and lying here as well as harlotry?"
He let his hand fall by his side and unclenched itself slowly; then turned away and sat down with a bitter little laugh.

"I congratulate you, my boy; you're clever at acting—like your mother." Jack was standing still, both hands spread out against the wall, as he had put them instinctively to save himself from falling. His face was as white as paper.

"I can't understand," he repeated helplessly, "I can't understand." "You'll understand presently," said the Vicar in a quiet voice. "Come here and sit down."

Jack obeyed silently; the room was beginning to heave and sway, and he was glad to sit still for a moment, whatever was going to happen next. He did not think of resenting the blow or the words which had followed it; they all seemed part of the nightmare. The Vicar leaned on the table, shading his eyes with one hand. When he spoke there was a stony helplessness about his voice which made his words sound in the boy's ears like a death sentence.

"I may as well tell you at once how many of your secrets have come out. We know all about the gambling, and the circulation of this sort of fifth and sixth class practices, and been going on in the cave by Treanna Head, and the seducing of Matthew Roscoe's daughter. She has confessed that the guilty person is one of Mr. Hewitt's boys, but she won't tell the name. I suppose it is not you who have committed this last abomination; an hour ago I should have believed it impossible at your age, but it seems I have much to learn."

He paused. Jack was looking straight before him, his lips a little parted, his great eyes wide and blank. There was no place left in his mind for amazement; he seemed to have fallen into a world of spectres at cross purposes, a hollow, ghostly world, where he, and his uncle, and every one he wandered through, fantastic evolutions, like dancing shadows in a fire-lit room, void of all form and meaning.

"Probably," the Vicar went on, "it is one of your older schoolfellows who has ruined the girl; but there can be no doubt that the ruin of the little boys lies chiefly on your head. Thompson has confessed, and Greaves, and Polwheal; and their statement implicates you directly, apart from the evidence of the knife."

"The knife . . ." Jack repeated, catching at the first word which brought up a definite image in this ghastly confusion of dreams.

"It was found in the possession of the agent who sold you the books—and other things. He acknowledged to the police that he had received it in part payment of a debt for his wares from a Portherrick schoolboy, who had been dealing with him for some time. No boy but you knew where the knife was kept."

After a moment he rose to leave the room; but he paused and looked back with his hand on the door.

"Jack," he said, "when your father died I took you and your sister in for his sake; but I did it with a heavy heart, for you have in you the blood of a harlot. I have fed and clothed you and dealt with you as if you had been my own; and now I have my reward. You have brought the abomination of desolation into my house and the pit of hell before my door; you have made me ashamed among my neighbors, and blackened my face in the eyes of my congregation. I thank God that your father is dead."

He turned and went out. Jack slowly lifted his head and looked round him. A few images had begun to shape themselves, more or less distinctly, out of the chaos of his mind. One thing, at least, was quite plain: he was being made the scapegoat for some one; perhaps for Billy Greaves, and for Thompson and Greaves and Polwheal. "Of course," he told himself wearily, "they knew

uncle would believe anything against me." It was simple enough; he had been leader in mischief to all these boys; again and again he had taken things upon himself to shield them, accepting, for his part, as a faithful captain should, the smallest share of booty and the largest of punishment; and all the while they had been dabbling in black secrets, and laughing at him for a fool behind his back. Now they had turned and sold him to his enemy to save their own skins.

He took up the photographs again and looked at them, wearily struggling to understand what use or pleasure things so meaningless and ugly could be to any one. Then, suddenly, the story that he had been reading upstairs came back upon his memory, and he understood why Lucrèce had killed herself. He laid down the photographs and sat still.

He understood it all now, the mysterious terror of the last few days; the whole thing was so easy, so hideously easy and simple. You jog along in your ordinary way and live an ordinary life, until your uncle, or Tarquin, or somebody else—what matter for the person or the manner of the thing?—some one whose muscles are stronger than your own, pounces down upon you, and does some horrible shame to your body, and goes his way; and you, that were clean, are never clean any more. Then if you can bear it, you go on living; and if not, you end like Lucrèce.

As Mrs. Raymond came in with tears running down her face, and clasped him in her arms, and he looked up, wondering, in a dull, careless way, for whom she was so sorry.

"My dear, my dear," she sobbed, "why will you not confess?" Jack drew himself away from her and rose. He looked at the photographs on the table; then at the weeping woman.

"Aunt Sarah, do you believe I did that sort of thing?"
"Oh, Jack," she burst out; "if you had ever been a good boy I would believe you, no matter how much appearances might be against you; but you know, yourself . . ."

She broke off to dry her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Yes, I know," he answered slowly. "I've always been wicked, haven't I? I suppose I was born so. Aunt Sarah, if I were to die now, do you think I should go straight to hell?"

She came up to him and took his hand gently.

"Listen, my dear; I'm not wise and clever, like your uncle, but I mean well by you. I do indeed; and I think—perhaps—it's partly our fault that you have fallen into the snares of the evil one. I mean—we may have been a little harsh—sometimes—and you were afraid to confess the first sin, and went from bad to worse—and you see—you must see, this is the path that leads to hell. Oh, my dear, I know it's hard to confess now—and your uncle is so terribly angry of course, he's right, for it's a deadly sin. But he'll forgive you in time—I know he will. And Jack, I'll do my best to stand between you and him—I will indeed—if you'll only confess."

He listened gravely till the piteous, confused appeal was finished; then he drew his hand away, standing very straight and sober. He was tall for his age, and his eyes were nearly on a level with hers.

"Aunt Sarah, I think you had better let me alone. It's a deadly sin, of course, but I true that my mother was a harlot."

She drew back with a little cry of horror. "Jack!"

"Uncle says so. It's a word in the Bible. And if she was, I can't help it, can I? And anyhow, what's the use of crying? It won't help me—oh, you'd better go away!"

"Go away," a hard voice echoed behind him. "A Christian woman has nothing to do with these abominations."

The Vicar took up the photographs and put them into his desk.

"Go away," he repeated sternly. "This is no place for you; Jack knows how to tell you of things that are not for my wife to hear."

"Josiah!" she cried out, and caught him by the arm. "Josiah," for God's sake—remember, he's a child's friend—how to tell you of things that are not for my wife to hear."

The Vicar turned on her with an angry burst of rage.

"A child! A child who can teach me, with my grey hair, things that I—Go out, go out, it is for men to deal with such children."

She went out, weeping bitterly. Then Jack looked up, and understood. He came forward gravely, quite self-possessed now.

"Uncle, I want to tell you. This is all a mistake. I know nothing about these things; I never saw them in my life before; I never heard a word about them."

The Vicar took up the knife. "And this?"
"Yes, I took the knife, that's true; and sold it; but not for those things, and not to the man that you said."

"What did you sell it for?"
"I sold it to a boy for a chair."

"To what boy? And for what?" Jack stopped short.

"What did you sell it for?"
For an instant Jack paused, considering what explanation he could invent; then he resigned himself.

"Oh," he cried; "it's hopeless! I can't tell you; I can't tell you—and if I did you'd never understand."

"I understand enough," the Vicar answered. "May Christ defend me from understanding any more!"

He sat down at his desk, motioning the boy to sit opposite him.

"I have given up what little hope I had of appealing to you by any other means than force. What I have to think of now is how to purify the school from defilement and how are not yet contaminated, and, above all, of your little sister."

His voice faltered for an instant; then he continued steadily: "I must know the whole truth, and I mean to have it from you at any cost. You have ten minutes to decide whether you will confess at once, or whether I must force you."

Except for the ticking of the watch there was absolute silence in the room.

As Jack had said, the position was hopeless; the very quality of his in-

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necence rendered it, to his uncle's mind, not merely incredible, but unthinkable.

The hand of the watch had crept past nine of the ten minute marks. He remembered climbing one day on Deadman's cliff, and seeing a rabbit which some one had shot, but not killed, and which had fallen to an inaccessible place, and lay there, bleeding to death. Now again, something was bleeding to death, as the watch ticked. When the hand should reach the minute mark the thing would die; and after that nothing in the world would ever matter any more. The ten minutes were over. Mr. Raymond rose and took the boy by the arm. "Come upstairs," he said. They went up in silence into Jack's room; and the key turned in the lock.

CHAPTER V.

On Friday evening after family prayers Mr. Raymond went up, as usual, to the locked gable room. It was after sunset, but there was still light enough to see the door.

Jack was crouching on the floor, half-dressed, in the furthest corner of the room. He would stay so without moving, sometimes, for hours to escape the pressure of fingers on his throat had made the Vicar wild with fear; then the boy had been overpowered and flung down on the floor.

And then had followed horrors which were the dreams of both for years to come.

After that his hands had been tied; but the precaution was needless; there had been no thought of resistance. There had been some helpless, mechanical struggling, but nothing more. When the Vicar had set him down, his throat had made the Vicar wild with fear; then the boy had been overpowered and flung down on the floor.

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"Is the arm hurting you much now?"

"It's not so bad when you let it alone."

"Does anything else hurt you except the arm?"
Jack looked round at him slowly, with grave contempt.

"What makes you think that? I haven't made a fuss, have I?"
"Indeed you haven't, you little Spartan," said Dr. Williams. He had overheard only the last words. "I wish all grown-up patients made so little—don't you, Jenkins?"

Dr. Jenkins said nothing. He had keener eyes than the older man, and to him the steady, practised stoicism of this mere child was a frightful thing to see. The rope marks on the wrists had aroused his suspicions at the first, and he had been watching quietly. When no one else was looking he had seen the boy put up his left hand furtively, and bite it. The action had explained to him the savage little dints marking the brown skin in so many places; apparently the mere clenching of teeth had not often proved help enough. "You didn't learn that trick in one night," he thought; "and you know more than you care to tell. We haven't got to the bottom of this story yet."

"Do you feel better now?" asked Dr. Williams. "Then we'll just unfasten your things and make sure there's no more mischief anywhere."

"I think I saw a cut on the right shoulder," Dr. Jenkins put in.

"Oh, we must expect to find a few little cuts and bruises after such a tumble," said the old doctor cheerfully. "You needn't shiver so, my boy; I'm not going to hurt you any more, that's all over. Hullo!"

He had uncovered the stained shirt. "Why, what the dickens have you been doing to yourself? Tumbling out of window every night for a month? You never got into this state by . . . Jenkins, come here; look at this child's shoulders! Why, it's . . ."

Then there was dead silence, while the three men watched each other's faces.

"Jack!" the clergyman whispered hoarsely, with lips as motionless as the boy's own. "For God's sake, why didn't you tell me the arm was broken?"

Jack only looked at him and laughed.

(To be continued.)

THE DESTROYER'S WORK.

Most Important Office Is That of Scouting.

Torpedo-boat destroyers, as the name implies, were first built to engage the small torpedo-boat, which had become a serious peril to the big battleships and large cruisers.

So serious was the menace that searchlights and rapid-fire guns were regarded as unreliable for the protection of these big ships against this smaller craft. It was thus that the destroyer was born, and, with graduation, its duties were extended until they included all that was formerly done by the small torpedo-boat, and much more besides.

It is a fact that the modern destroyer is three or even four times as large as one of the earlier type, which naturally renders it much more seaworthy, and obviously increases its radius of action, seeing that it is capable of carrying much more fuel.

The objects of a modern torpedo-boat destroyer flotilla are many. Perhaps the paramount duty of every vessel in the flotilla is to discharge its torpedoes, should it get near enough, at the enemy's big battleships. But a very important office to fulfil is that of scouting, which comprises locating and reporting the position of the enemy.

Should the enemy make a night attack, the destroyers are relied upon to locate and report the position of the attacking fleet's torpedo craft, as well as sink or drive them away before they can force an attack against the bigger battleships.

A New Way.

A furrier, wishing to inform customers that he would make up furs in a fashionable manner, out of old furs, which ladies have at home, appended the following to one of his advertisements: "N.B.—Capotes, victorines, etc., made up for ladies in fashionable styles out of their own skins!"



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CHURCHES IN WAR.

Always Suffered Since Cannon Were Introduced.

During the heavy fighting on the flat lands of Flanders the church towers have been used as look-out places and signalling stations, a use to which they have been put many times in the past, including our own Civil War, says London Answers.

In very ancient times churches were used as havens of refuge during raids, and the massive towers with few openings which may be found here and there on the borders of Wales and Scotland, the coast, and parts of the Continent, show plainly that they must have made fine strong-holds.

Churches have always suffered in war-time, especially since cannon were first introduced, and as one rambles about the pleasant roads of England he will hear tales of churches which have been packed with wool to prevent damage or to hinder a commander from using the sacred edifice as a barracks.

At Chedzoy, on Sedgemoor, may be seen the relics of that battle which was disastrous to the welfare of the Somerset men. On a stone outside are still visible the marks made by Montmouth's soldiers when they sharpened their swords, scythes, and other rough weapons.

In a ruder age churches were no more respected than they are by the modern Huns, and many suffered during the Civil War, though they were not so horribly defiled.

Formula for Fireproofing.

To make wood fireproof soak 27.5 parts by weight of sulphate of zinc, 11 of potash 22 of alum, and 11 of manganic oxide in lukewarm water in an iron boiler and gradually add 11 parts by weight of 60 per cent. sulphuric acid. The wood to be prepared is placed upon an iron grating in an apparatus of suitable size. The liquid is then poured into the apparatus, and the wood allowed to remain completely covered for three hours.

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Seventeen grammophone needles were extracted from a soldier's back at Cardiff, Wales, the wounds having been caused by a shell bursting near a grammophone in the war.

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