

THE CRYPTOGRAM.



CHAPTER I.

TWO OLD FRIENDS.

CHETWYNDE CASTLE was a large baronial mansion, belonging to the Plantagenet period, and situated in Monmouthshire. It was a grand old place, with dark towers, and turrets, and gloomy walls surmounted with battlements, half of which had long since tumbled down, while the other half seemed tottering to ruin. That menacing ruin was on one side of the structure concealed beneath a growth of ivy, which contrasted the dark green of its leaves with the sombre hue of the ancient stones. Time with its defacing fingers had only lent additional grandeur to this venerable pile. As it rose there—"standing with half its battlements alone, and with five hundred years of ivy grown"—its picturesque magnificence and its air of hoar antiquity made it one of the noblest monuments of the past which England could show.

All its surroundings were in keeping with the central object. Here were no neat paths, no well-kept avenues, no trim lawns. On the con-

trary, every thing bore the unmistakable marks of neglect and decay; the walks were overgrown, the terraces dilapidated, and the rose pleasaunce had degenerated into a tangled mass of bushes and briars. It seemed as though the whole domain were about to revert into its original state of nature; and every thing spoke either of the absence of a master, or else of something more important still—the absence of money.

The castle stood on slightly elevated ground; and from its gray stone ivy-covered portal so magnificent was the view that the most careless observer would be attracted by it, and stand wonder-struck at the beauty of the scene, till he forgot in the glories of nature the deficiencies of art. Below, and not far away, flowed the silvery Wye, most charming of English streams, winding tortuously through fertile meadows and wooded copses; farther off lay fruitful vales and rolling hills; while in the distance the prospect was bounded by the giant forms of the Welsh mountains.

At the moment when this story opens these beauties were but faintly visible through the fast-fading twilight of a summer evening; the shadows were rapidly deepening; and the only signs of life about the place appeared where from some of the windows at the eastern end faint rays of light stole out into the gloom.

The interior of the castle corresponded with the exterior in magnificence and in ruin—in its picturesque commingling of splendor and decay. The hall was hung with arms and armor of past generations, and ornamented with stags' heads, antlers, and other trophies of the chase; but rust, and mould, and dust covered them all. Throughout the house a large number of rooms were empty, and the whole western end was unfurnished. In the furnished rooms at the eastern end every thing belonged to a past generation, and all the massive and antiquated furniture bore painful marks of poverty and neglect. Time was every where asserting his power, and nowhere was any resistance made to his ravages.

Some comfort, however, was still to be found in the old place. There were rooms which were as yet free from the general touch of desolation. Among these was the dining-room, where at this time the heavy curtains were drawn, the lamps shone out cheerily, and, early June though it was, a bright wood-fire blazed on the ample hearth, lighting up with a ruddy glow the heavy panelings and the time-worn tapestries.

Dinner was just over, the dessert was on the table, and two gentlemen were sitting over their wine—though this is to be taken rather in a figurative sense, for their conversation was so en-