

PARSON VENABLES' ADVENTURE.

CHAP. I.

St. Fimbarrus is the name of a lonely little parish on a hillside in a distant county. The country round about is all wild moorland. From the church porch of St. Fimbarrus you can see many miles of undulating downs, now rising into hills of respectable elevation, and again sinking into valleys, through which a little stream brawls among stunted trees. There are no trees in St. Fimbarrus itself, save a few weakly firs in the vicar's garden, which he nurses with sedulous care, in the hope that they may one day afford some shelter from the fierce winds that sweep down the glens on every side towards the vicarage. It is a hope unlikely to be realized; certainly, its fulfilment is so distant that ere it comes, the vicar will have been laid in that other tenement of his, within sight of his study window, which he purchased when his last child was laid there.

It was a bright afternoon in May, and the vicar stood on the gravel sweep before his house, scanning the sky anxiously. He turned to gaze successively at each quarter of the heavens, inhaled rather dubiously several large mouthfuls of the air, to satisfy himself whether it tasted salt, as it must if the wind blew from the sea, the rainy quarter at St. Fimbarrus; and then, with a brighter countenance, he re-entered the house.

"You may put on your things, Anna," he cried out cheerfully as he crossed the hall, "and tell Hugh to bring the pony round."

"Then I shall get my cross-stitch pattern, after all; and I can talk with Mrs. Hartle about the butter." So saying, Mrs. Venables, in a state of some excitement gathered up her shawl, her spectacles, and her knitting, on which she had been employed, in preparation for going up-stairs to make ready for the desired journey.

"You can talk to her about anything you please, my dear," said the vicar, rather testily, for he was in truth somewhat tired of hearing of his wife's difficulties with regard to the cross-stitch pattern and the butter.

"I shall talk to her about those two things, and nothing else," said the old lady with determination; "we shan't have more than enough time to settle them."

"Well, well, my dear, as long as you are satisfied," returned the vicar. "Will you be ready in ten minutes?"

"Not if you hurry me with calling to know how long I shall be. I have so many things to remember, and I can't tell what I've done with my my tablets."—Belinda! Where is Belinda?—Oh, very well! I'm coming up-stairs, my love."

The vicar went out again into the sunshine. He had not taken many turns along the walk beneath the windows of the house, when a crunching sound of wheels on the gravel announced the arrival of the pony.

"How is he to-day, Hugh?" asked the vicar. "Pretty quiet?"

"Too much oats inside him, sir," said the man, touching his hat. "Oats goes to friskiness."

"I'm afraid you're right, Hugh," the vicar answered, observing how impatiently the pony was stamping on the gravel. "Poor Charles!" and he attempted to stroke the animal's nose—a compliment which Charles resented by first tossing his head, as if he wished to feel his master's fingers between his teeth, and then starting off at full racing speed in the direction of the chaise. Hugh, muttering blasphemies, made desperate efforts to catch "good Charles's head; while in the midst of the confusion, a window was thrown up and Mrs. Venables cried loudly: "Stop, stop! We're not nearly ready yet."

"I wish you'd make haste, my dear," returned the vicar; "this restive animal has nearly torn my arms out of the sockets."

"Nonsense! You must keep him quiet."

"That's more easily said than done; but we will try."

"It's very easy, I'm sure," returned the lady. "Men have no tact. I'll come down presently with an apple."

The vicar looked at Hugh and shook his head somewhat dubiously; he doubted the virtue of the apple.

"If the missus would leave his feed to me, sir, he wouldn't be half so lively," remarked Hugh; "but when ladies will go and fill his box with a double portion of oats, so as he's a-eatin' all day, and never going out at all!"

"I know—I know," the vicar said hastily, "ladies don't understand horse-flesh, Hugh."

"They don't," rejoined the man gruffly.

At this juncture, Mrs. Venables sallied forth, accompanied by her niece Belinda, who carried several thick shawls and a heavy carriage rug.

"Shall we want all those wraps on such a bright day?" the vicar asked.

"Yes; indeed we shall. It will be very cold when the sun goes in;" and with that, Mrs. Venables took the wraps from her niece and stowed them carefully in the back seat. After satisfying herself that they were not likely to fall out, she went up to the pony's head. "Naughty Charles!" she said in a coaxing voice—"bad Charles, to startle your good mistress so, and pull your master's arms out of the sockets."

This affectionate adjuration apparently did not penetrate to Charles's heart, for he whisked his head about, at the imminent risk of striking his mistress in the face; and being somewhat elated at the result of his last manoeuvre, he was steadily endeavouring to get on his hind-legs, with the apparent intention of dancing into the town.

"Better not touch him, ma'am," advised Hugh. "I'll hold him fast enough while you get in."

"He seems quite excited to-day," said Mrs. Venables, a little nervously. "I think you had better drive him, Theophilus."

"O yes, Uncle Theo," Miss Belinda interposed; "do drive him yourself—he seems so very wild."

"Stuff!" said the vicar. "If Charles is at all fresh, Hugh's is a much safer hand on the reins than mine.—Get in, my dear, or we shall not reach the town to-day."

But as Mrs. Venables placed her foot upon the step, Charles made a sudden start, which, though checked on the instant by a sharp tug at his head, was almost sufficient to throw the old lady down.

"Theophilus," she said, retreating two or three steps from the pony-carriage, and looking at her husband with a face full of apprehension, "this pony is not himself to-day, and I must insist on your driving."

"I know what's the matter with him, aunt," said Miss Belinda mysteriously. "Some pixy's got into him. I've seen a cow go on just like that at milking-time, and they always know then that the pixies are about the farm."

The vicar turned round angrily. "How often am I to tell you, Belinda, that I won't have those silly tales repeated about my house! Is it possible for me, do you think, to expel superstition from the minds of the honest people over whom I am set, if one of my own family spreads it abroad?"

"Never mind, never mind," interposed Mrs. Venables. "Belinda didn't mean any harm. It's quite likely she may be right too; and that's another reason why you should drive Theophilus. I always feel so safe when you have the reins."

"It's not at all a well-grounded feeling, my dear," replied the vicar, "if you only knew it. You are vastly safer with Hugh.—But there; I give way.—Hugh, you must stay at home. Look out for us about half-past six."

"And, Belinda," called Mrs. Venables as the pony-carriage passed out on to the road, "have a little fire, and keep your uncle's slippers warm."

As soon as Charles emerged upon the high-road, the evil spirit came from him and he fell into a steady trot.

"There, you see, Theophilus; he is quite quiet now; I knew he would be with you."

The vicar could not repress a slight feeling of triumph as he contrasted the present demure conduct of the pony with his late obstreperous behaviour. "He certainly is," he answered. "I begin to think I must have some of the qualities of a professional whip."

Charles's conduct was indeed exemplary; and a steady uneventful drive of about an hour, all down hill, brought the vicar and his wife to the top of the steep descent about the town.

"There is Dr. Hartle!" exclaimed Mrs. Venables excitedly. "Don't you think he is growing very gray?"

"Not more so than he has been for the last ten years, my dear.—How are you, Hartle?"

The doctor, mounted on a stout brown cob, had ridden up alongside the vicar's carriage and was exchanging greetings. "Jane will be delighted to see you," said he. "She has been complaining for three days past that she sees no visitors now. You will stay and take tea with us?"

The vicar demurred to this proposal, and the point was not settled when they arrived at the door of the doctor's pretty dwelling.

"Jane!" cried the doctor, pushing open the door of his parlour: "Here is Mrs. Venables.—I am awfully glad you came in to-day, Venables; for I have just got a batch of music which I want to show you."

"I can't think," said the vicar, "why you go foraging among all this newfangled jingle, when you don't half know the works of the old men who really understood where noise begins and music ends."

"I declare," said the doctor energetically, "if a month passes without my seeing you, Venables, you retrograde in the most shocking way. Let me see—March, April. It is barely five weeks since we spent that delightful evening together where you really did begin to see what fine work had been turned out in the last thirty years."

"Yes, I know," the vicar admitted; "but when I came to think it over, I perceived that I was wrong."

"I quite expected it!" ejaculated Dr. Hartle. "I knew you would go back to your musty fugues and canons. Well, I shall have to convert you again, that's all. Here is a batch of songs by Liszt now. Read that over to yourself, and then I'll sing it."

"Liszt!" said Mr. Venables, taking the sheet of music. "He was a man of deplorable character."

The doctor muttered something beneath his breath, at which his friend looked up hastily; but he was wise enough not to repeat it.

"This is very strange and eccentric music," said the vicar, after carefully perusing the song; "and the harmonies seem against all rule. Here is the pedal actually used in a descending scale."

"My dear sir, how often must I tell you that the breach of formal rules never can condemn any music if the effect is good! Now, listen!" The doctor possessed a very sweet tenor, not powerful, but admirably trained, and he rendered the song extremely well.

"There's the merit about that music," the vicar said; "but what a pity that a man of talent should allow himself such license."

This remark led to a long discussion. It was an old dispute, and every inch of the ground of battle was familiar to both the combatants. A vast array of authorities was marshalled; hosts of opinions, of every degree of weight, were adduced; volumes of reference were piled up on the table to a mountainous height; phrases without number were hummed, sung, played on the doctor's excellent piano, or even decried out on the table. The afternoon wore away, and neither of the disputants was in the least inclined to admit himself worsted, when the town clock chimed six, and the vicar, starting up, declared he had had no idea it was so late, and that he must not lose a moment in setting out on his homeward journey.

"I should be very sorry to be out after dark," he said. "The roads across the downs are very confusing in a bad light."

"Poor! You should know them well enough. There's an excellent light, too! till nearly eight o'clock now.—What, won't you be convinced? Then, I'll order round the pony.—Where is Mrs. Venables?"

Where Mrs. Venables was, nobody seemed to know. The housemaid was certain she had heard the two ladies talking upstairs not ten minutes before, while the cook was equally positive that she had seen them walking in the garden. It was quickly ascertained that they were not in either of these places now, and messengers were despatched in every direction in which it seemed likely they had gone. The pony had been at the door for twenty minutes, however, and Mr. Venables was in a fever of impatience to be gone, before his wife and Mrs. Hartle came strolling slowly down the street talking as leisurely as if nobody had been waiting for them.

The vicar was a man of temper; he forbore to reproach his wife, and merely pointed out to her that in a few minutes the town clock would sound half-past six, the hour at which they had arranged to be at home.

"Yes; I knew it would be so," said the old lady calmly; "we always are late when you begin to quarrel with Dr. Hartle about your crotchets and your quavers."

"My dear," rejoined the vicar, with just the smallest tinge of reproach in his voice, "if you had been ready when I was, we should have reached the top of Dumbleby Hill by this time."

"You shan't throw the fault on me, Theophilus," said his wife firmly. "You were to blame, and you alone.—Now, listen to what Mrs. Hartle told me."

Mrs. Hartle's news proved interesting enough to beguile the tedium of the weary climb up Dumbleby Hill; and as Charles toiled slowly across the road from side to side of the steep ascent, neither his master nor his mistress observed that thick clouds had obscured the setting sun and that the air was growing dense and moist. It was only when, on reaching the hilltop, the vicar shook out the reins and urged Charles forward, and he looked back and saw that the town was hidden from sight by wreaths of

mist. The hedgerows, too, were beginning to look ghostly; little drifts of cloud were stealing along the hollows; and the vicar, as he glanced uneasily about him, could not conceal from himself the conviction that before they could reach the vicarage the fog must have surrounded them altogether.

"I wish we were at home," he said, cracking his whip; "or, at all events, over the next hill."

"Oh, I don't think much of this," replied Mrs. Venables cheerfully. "We have been out when it was much thicker. I haven't told you half my news yet.—Do you know, Robert Tomkins is going to emigrate! Think of that—with all those young children. I call it infamous!"

"If he can't get anything to do here?" suggested the vicar, glancing nervously over his shoulder.

This remark led Mrs. Venables off into a tirade on the evils of emigration, which she regarded as a species of impiety, an unwarrantable interference with the decrees of providence, who knew much better where a man was likely to thrive than his own judgment could tell him. The good old lady was in the habit of enforcing this belief with copious extracts, not only from various pious writers, but also from her own experience, and in this rhetorical exercise she became so much engrossed that she observed nothing of the thickening of the mist to a solid wall around them, nor of the slackening of Charles's pace as his master's nervous hand now urged him forward, now checked him sharply with a momentary fear that he had lost the road.

"I don't know what to make of this," the vicar exclaimed at last; and, handing over the reins to his wife, he sprang out. "I can't tell what road we are in."

The fog had indeed become so dense that the borders of the road were not in sight; only a little space of a few feet immediately around the carriage was visible; all beyond was a uniform mass of cloud.

"Don't go out of sight, Theophilus," Mrs. Venables entreated; "I shall be very frightened if you do."

"Nonsense!" replied the vicar, who was grooping about in the mist. "How am I to ascertain where we are unless I can find some landmark?"

"But you can do that in the carriage. If you will only get in, we can drive up to the edge of the road and see quite well. If you go out into the mist, you will never get back to me again."

The vicar returned with a dejected countenance and climbed his seat.

"I think I saw the great quoit which was overturned by the storm last February," he said; "but one looks so much like another in this light.—If only Hugh were with us!"

CHAPTER II.

Mr. and Mrs. Venables drove on for a little way in silence. It was growing cold, and a thick rime appeared on the vicar's beard and hair and on his wife's shawl. Doubtless, Charles's tail and mane were completely silvered with it; but for some time past the pony had been hidden from the sight of the driver.

"If that was the great quoit, we should be near the cross-roads," said the vicar. "Hark! what is that noise?"

They both listened intently, and distinguished a man's voice, calling as it seemed to some animals. Judging by the loudness of the sound, it was not distant from them.

"It is probably Collins driving home his goats," said the vicar. "I wish we could make him hear us. Hardly any weather baffles him; the downs are so familiar to these men who have been bred on them.—Halloa! Collins—hilloho!" He shouted at the full power of his voice, and waited for an answer. An indistinct halloo came in reply, mingled with the barking of a dog; but the sound was evidently more distant than before, and in a moment it ceased altogether.

Mrs. Venables began to whimper. "I didn't think Collins would have left us like this!" she sobbed. "Cruel man! he may find us dead in the morning."

"Pooh, pooh!" said the vicar cheerfully; "we shall be at home presently.—Here we are at the cross-roads, I declare. Now, we have only to turn up here and we shall be at home presently. Put your other shawl about you, my dear.—There! Now you are quite comfortable again."

But, oddly enough, Charles declined to turn up the cross-road. He resisted stoutly every effort which his master made on the reins; and at last, by a strong tug of his muscular neck, he actually got his head round in the opposite direction, and trotted away at a sharp pace towards the quarter whence they had come.

"He's running away!" screamed the old lady. "Hold him in! Pull him up!"