

## **THE STORY**

### **FIRST PERIOD**

#### **CHAPTER I - THE SOUR FRENCH WINE**

WHILE the line to be taken by the new railway between Culm and Everill was still under discussion, the engineer caused some difference of opinion among the moneyed men who were the first Directors of the Company, by asking if they proposed to include among their Stations the little old town of Honeybuzzard.

For years past, commerce had declined, and population had decreased in this ancient and curious place. Painters knew it well, and prized its mediaeval houses as a mine of valuable material for their art. Persons of cultivated tastes, who were interested in church architecture of the fourteenth century, sometimes pleased and flattered the Rector by subscribing to his fund for the restoration of the tower, and the removal of the accumulated rubbish of hundreds of years from the crypt. Small speculators, not otherwise in a state of insanity, settled themselves in the town, and tried the desperate experiment of opening a shop; spent their little capital, put up the shutters, and disappeared. The old market-place still showed its list of market-law's, issued by the Mayor and Corporation in the prosperous bygone times; and every week there were fewer and fewer people to obey the laws. The great empty enclosure looked more cheerful, when there was no market held, and when the boys of the town played in the deserted place. In the last warehouse left in a state of repair, the crane was generally idle; the windows were mostly shut up; and a solitary man represented languishing trade, idling at a half-opened door. The muddy river rose and fell with the distant tide. At rare intervals a collier discharged its cargo on the mouldering quay, or an empty barge took in a load of hay. One bold house advertised, in a dirty window, apartments to let. There was a lawyer in the town, who had no occasion to keep a clerk; and there was a doctor who hoped to sell his practice for anything that it would fetch. The directors of the new railway, after a stormy meeting, decided on offering (by means of a Station) a last chance of revival to the dying town. The town had not vitality enough left to be grateful; the railway stimulant produced no effect. Of all his colleagues in Great Britain and Ireland, the station-master

at Honeybuzzard was the idlest man--and this, as he said to the unemployed porter, through no want of energy on his own part.

Late on a rainy autumn afternoon, the slow train left one traveller at the Station. He got out of a first-class carriage; he carried an umbrella and a travelling-bag; and he asked his way to the best inn. The station-master and the porter compared notes. One of them said: "Evidently a gentleman." The other added: "What can he possibly want here?"

The stranger twice lost his way in the tortuous old streets of the town before he reached the inn. On giving his orders, it appeared that he wanted three things: a private room, something to eat, and, while the dinner was being cooked, materials for writing a letter.

Answering her daughter's questions downstairs, the landlady described her guest as a nice-looking man dressed in deep mourning. "Young, my dear, with beautiful dark brown hair, and a grand beard, and a sweet sorrowful look. Ah, his eyes would tell anybody that his black clothes are not a mere sham. Whether married or single, of course I can't say. But I noticed the name on his travelling-bag. A distinguished name in my opinion--Hugh Mountjoy. I wonder what he'll order to drink when he has his dinner? What a mercy it will be if we can get rid of another bottle of the sour French wine!"

The bell in the private room rang at that moment; and the landlady's daughter, it is needless to say, took the opportunity of forming her own opinion of Mr. Hugh Mountjoy.

She returned with a letter in her hand, consumed by a vain longing for the advantages of gentle birth. "Ah, mother, if I was a young lady of the higher classes, I know whose wife I should like to be!" Not particularly interested in sentimental aspirations, the landlady asked to see Mr. Mountjoy's letter. The messenger who delivered it was to wait for an answer. It was addressed to: "Miss Henley, care of Clarence Vimpany, Esquire, Honeybuzzard." Urged by an excited imagination, the daughter longed to see Miss Henley. The mother was at a loss to understand why Mr. Mountjoy should have troubled himself to write the letter at all. "If he knows the young lady who is staying at the doctor's house," she said, "why doesn't he call on Miss Henley?" She handed the letter back to her daughter. "There! let the ostler take it; he's got nothing to do."

"No, mother. The ostler's dirty hands mustn't touch it--I'll take the letter myself. Perhaps I may see Miss Henley." Such was the impression which Mr. Hugh Mountjoy had innocently produced on a sensitive young person,

condemned by destiny to the barren sphere of action afforded by a country inn!

The landlady herself took the dinner upstairs--a first course of mutton chops and potatoes, cooked to a degree of imperfection only attained in an English kitchen. The sour French wine was still on the good woman's mind. "What would you choose to drink, sir?" she asked. Mr. Mountjoy seemed to feel no interest in what he might have to drink. "We have some French wine, sir."

"Thank you, ma'am; that will do."

When the bell rang again, and the time came to produce the second course of cheese and celery, the landlady allowed the waiter to take her place. Her experience of the farmers who frequented the inn, and who had in some few cases been induced to taste the wine, warned her to anticipate an outbreak of just anger from Mr. Mountjoy. He, like the others, would probably ask what she "meant by poisoning him with such stuff as that." On the return of the waiter, she put the question: "Did the gentleman complain of the French wine?"

"He wants to see you about it, ma'am."

The landlady turned pale. The expression of Mr. Mountjoy's indignation was evidently reserved for the mistress of the house. "Did he swear," she asked, "when he tasted it?"

"Lord bless you, ma'am, no! Drank it out of a tumbler, and--if you will believe me--actually seemed to like it."

The landlady recovered her colour. Gratitude to Providence for having sent a customer to the inn, who could drink sour wine without discovering it, was the uppermost feeling in her ample bosom as she entered the private room. Mr. Mountjoy justified her anticipations. He was simple enough--with his tumbler before him, and the wine as it were under his nose--to begin with an apology.

"I am sorry to trouble you, ma'am. May I ask where you got this wine?"

"The wine, sir, was one of my late husband's bad debts. It was all he could get from a Frenchman who owed him money."

"It's worth money, ma'am."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes, indeed. This is some of the finest and purest claret that I have tasted for many a long day past."

An alarming suspicion disturbed the serenity of the landlady's mind. Was his extraordinary opinion of the wine sincere? Or was it Mr. Mountjoy's wicked design to entrap her into praising her claret and then to imply that she was a cheat by declaring what he really thought of it? She took refuge in a cautious reply:

"You are the first gentleman, sir, who has not found fault with it."

"In that case, perhaps you would like to get rid of the wine?" Mr. Mountjoy suggested.

The landlady was still cautious. "Who will buy it of me, sir?"

"I will. How much do you charge for it by the bottle?"

It was, by this time, clear that he was not mischievous--only a little crazy. The worldly-wise hostess took advantage of that circumstance to double the price. Without hesitation, she said: "Five shillings a bottle, sir."

Often, too often, the irony of circumstances brings together, on this earthly scene, the opposite types of vice and virtue. A lying landlady and a guest incapable of deceit were looking at each other across a narrow table; equally unconscious of the immeasurable moral gulf that lay between them, Influenced by honourable feeling, innocent Hugh Mountjoy lashed the landlady's greed for money to the full-gallop of human cupidity.

"I don't think you are aware of the value of your wine," he said. "I have claret in my cellar which is not so good as this, and which costs more than you have asked. It is only fair to offer you seven-and-sixpence a bottle."

When an eccentric traveller is asked to pay a price, and deliberately raises that price against himself, where is the sensible woman--especially if she happens to be a widow conducting an unprofitable business--who would hesitate to improve the opportunity? The greedy landlady raised her terms.

"On reflection, sir, I think I ought to have ten shillings a bottle, if you please."

"The wine may be worth it," Mountjoy answered quietly; "but it is more than I can afford to pay. No, ma'am; I will leave you to find some lover of good claret with a longer purse than mine."

It was in this man's character, when he said No, to mean No. Mr. Mountjoy's hostess perceived that her crazy customer was not to be trifled with. She lowered her terms again with the headlong hurry of terror. "You shall have it, Sir, at your own price," said this entirely shameless and perfectly respectable woman.

The bargain having been closed under these circumstances, the landlady's daughter knocked at the door. "I took your letter myself, sir," she said modestly; "and here is the answer." (She had seen Miss Henley, and did not think much of her.) Mountjoy offered the expression of his thanks, in words never to be forgotten by a sensitive young person, and opened his letter. It was short enough to be read in a moment; but it was evidently a favourable reply. He took his hat in a hurry, and asked to be shown the way to Mr. Vimpany's house.