

DAME THE NINTH--THE DUCHESS OF HAMPTONSHIRE

By the Quiet Gentleman

Some fifty years ago, the then Duke of Hamptonshire, fifth of that title, was incontestibly the head man in his county, and particularly in the neighbourhood of Batton. He came of the ancient and loyal family of Saxelbye, which, before its ennoblement, had numbered many knightly and ecclesiastical celebrities in its male line. It would have occupied a painstaking county historian a whole afternoon to take rubbings of the numerous effigies and heraldic devices graven to their memory on the brasses, tablets, and altar-tombs in the aisle of the parish-church. The Duke himself, however, was a man little attracted by ancient chronicles in stone and metal, even when they concerned his own beginnings. He allowed his mind to linger by preference on the many graceless and unedifying pleasures which his position placed at his command. He could on occasion close the mouths of his dependents by a good bomb-like oath, and he argued doggedly with the parson on the virtues of cock-fighting and baiting the bull.

This nobleman's personal appearance was somewhat impressive. His complexion was that of the copper-beech tree. His frame was stalwart, though slightly stooping. His mouth was large, and he carried an unpolished sapling as his walking-stick, except when he carried a spud for cutting up any thistle he encountered on his walks. His castle stood in the midst of a park, surrounded by dusky elms, except to the

southward; and when the moon shone out, the gleaming stone facade, backed by heavy boughs, was visible from the distant high road as a white spot on the surface of darkness. Though called a castle, the building was little fortified, and had been erected with greater eye to internal convenience than those crannied places of defence to which the name strictly appertains. It was a castellated mansion as regular as a chessboard on its ground-plan, ornamented with make-believe bastions and machicolations, behind which were stacks of battlemented chimneys. On still mornings, at the fire-lighting hour, when ghostly house-maids stalk the corridors, and thin streaks of light through the shutter-chinks lend startling winks and smiles to ancestors on canvas, twelve or fifteen thin stems of blue smoke sprouted upwards from these chimney-tops, and spread into a flat canopy on high. Around the site stretched ten thousand acres of good, fat, unimpeachable soil, plentiful in glades and lawns wherever visible from the castle-windows, and merging in homely arable where screened from the too curious eye by ingeniously-contrived plantations.

Some way behind the owner of all this came the second man in the parish, the rector, the Honourable and Reverend Mr. Oldbourne, a widower, over stiff and stern for a clergyman, whose severe white neckcloth, well-kept gray hair, and right-lined face betokened none of those sympathetic traits whereon depends so much of a parson's power to do good among his fellow-creatures. The last, far-removed man of the series--altogether the Neptune of these local primaries--was the curate, Mr. Alwyn Hill. He

was a handsome young deacon with curly hair, dreamy eyes--so dreamy that to look long into them was like ascending and floating among summer clouds--a complexion as fresh as a flower, and a chin absolutely beardless. Though his age was about twenty-five, he looked not much over nineteen.

The rector had a daughter called Emmeline, of so sweet and simple a nature that her beauty was discovered, measured, and inventoried by almost everybody in that part of the country before it was suspected by herself to exist. She had been bred in comparative solitude; a rencounter with men troubled and confused her. Whenever a strange visitor came to her father's house she slipped into the orchard and remained till he was gone, ridiculing her weakness in apostrophes, but unable to overcome it. Her virtues lay in no resistant force of character, but in a natural inappetency for evil things, which to her were as unmeaning as joints of flesh to a herbivorous creature. Her charms of person, manner, and mind, had been clear for some time to the Antinous in orders, and no less so to the Duke, who, though scandalously ignorant of dainty phrases, ever showing a clumsy manner towards the gentler sex, and, in short, not at all a lady's man, took fire to a degree that was wellnigh terrible at sudden sight of Emmeline, a short time after she was turned seventeen.

It occurred one afternoon at the corner of a shrubbery between the castle and the rectory, where the Duke was standing to watch the heaving of a

mole, when the fair girl brushed past at a distance of a few yards, in the full light of the sun, and without hat or bonnet. The Duke went home like a man who had seen a spirit. He ascended to the picture-gallery of his castle, and there passed some time in staring at the bygone beauties of his line as if he had never before considered what an important part those specimens of womankind had played in the evolution of the Saxelbye race. He dined alone, drank rather freely, and declared to himself that Emmeline Oldbourne must be his.

Meanwhile there had unfortunately arisen between the curate and this girl some sweet and secret understanding. Particulars of the attachment remained unknown then and always, but it was plainly not approved of by her father. His procedure was cold, hard, and inexorable. Soon the curate disappeared from the parish, almost suddenly, after bitter and hard words had been heard to pass between him and the rector one evening in the garden, intermingled with which, like the cries of the dying in the din of battle, were the beseeching sobs of a woman. Not long after this it was announced that a marriage between the Duke and Miss Oldbourne was to be solemnized at a surprisingly early date.

The wedding-day came and passed; and she was a Duchess. Nobody seemed to think of the ousted man during the day, or else those who thought of him concealed their meditations. Some of the less subservient ones were disposed to speak in a jocular manner of the august husband and wife, others to make correct and pretty speeches about them, according as their

sex and nature dictated. But in the evening, the ringers in the belfry, with whom Alwyn had been a favourite, eased their minds a little concerning the gentle young man, and the possible regrets of the woman he had loved.

'Don't you see something wrong in it all?' said the third bell as he wiped his face. 'I know well enough where she would have liked to stable her horses to-night, when they have done their journey.'

'That is, you would know if you could tell where young Mr. Hill is living, which is known to none in the parish.'

'Except to the lady that this ring o' grandsire triples is in honour of.'

Yet these friendly cottagers were at this time far from suspecting the real dimensions of Emmeline's misery, nor was it clear even to those who came into much closer communion with her than they, so well had she concealed her heart-sickness. But bride and bridegroom had not long been home at the castle when the young wife's unhappiness became plainly enough perceptible. Her maids and men said that she was in the habit of turning to the wainscot and shedding stupid scalding tears at a time when a right-minded lady would have been overhauling her wardrobe. She prayed earnestly in the great church-pew, where she sat lonely and insignificant as a mouse in a cell, instead of counting her rings, falling asleep, or amusing herself in silent laughter at the queer old people in the congregation, as previous beauties of the family had done in their time.

She seemed to care no more for eating and drinking out of crystal and silver than from a service of earthen vessels. Her head was, in truth, full of something else; and that such was the case was only too obvious to the Duke, her husband. At first he would only taunt her for her folly in thinking of that milk-and-water parson; but as time went on his charges took a more positive shape. He would not believe her assurance that she had in no way communicated with her former lover, nor he with her, since their parting in the presence of her father. This led to some strange scenes between them which need not be detailed; their result was soon to take a catastrophic shape.

One dark quiet evening, about two months after the marriage, a man entered the gate admitting from the highway to the park and avenue which ran up to the house. He arrived within two hundred yards of the walls, when he left the gravelled drive and drew near to the castle by a roundabout path leading into a shrubbery. Here he stood still. In a few minutes the strokes of the castle-clock resounded, and then a female figure entered the same secluded nook from an opposite direction. There the two indistinct persons leapt together like a pair of dewdrops on a leaf; and then they stood apart, facing each other, the woman looking down.

'Emmeline, you begged me to come, and here I am, Heaven forgive me!' said the man hoarsely.

'You are going to emigrate, Alwyn,' she said in broken accents. 'I have

heard of it; you sail from Plymouth in three days in the Western
Glory?'

'Yes. I can live in England no longer. Life is as death to me here,'
says he.

'My life is even worse--worse than death. Death would not have driven me
to this extremity. Listen, Alwyn--I have sent for you to beg to go with
you, or at least to be near you--to do anything so that it be not to stay
here.'

'To go away with me?' he said in a startled tone.

'Yes, yes--or under your direction, or by your help in some way! Don't
be horrified at me--you must bear with me whilst I implore it. Nothing
short of cruelty would have driven me to this. I could have borne my
doom in silence had I been left unmolested; but he tortures me, and I
shall soon be in the grave if I cannot escape.'

To his shocked inquiry how her husband tortured her, the Duchess said
that it was by jealousy. 'He tries to wring admissions from me
concerning you,' she said, 'and will not believe that I have not
communicated with you since my engagement to him was settled by my
father, and I was forced to agree to it.'

The poor curate said that this was the heaviest news of all. 'He has not

personally ill-used you?' he asked.

'Yes,' she whispered.

'What has he done?'

She looked fearfully around, and said, sobbing: 'In trying to make me confess to what I have never done, he adopts plans I dare not describe for terrifying me into a weak state, so that I may own to anything! I resolved to write to you, as I had no other friend.' She added, with dreary irony, 'I thought I would give him some ground for his suspicion, so as not to disgrace his judgment.'

'Do you really mean, Emmeline,' he tremblingly inquired, 'that you--that you want to fly with me?'

'Can you think that I would act otherwise than in earnest at such a time as this?'

He was silent for a minute or more. 'You must not go with me,' he said.

'Why?'

'It would be sin.'

'It cannot be sin, for I have never wanted to commit sin in my life;

and it isn't likely I would begin now, when I pray every day to die and be sent to Heaven out of my misery!

'But it is wrong, Emmeline, all the same.'

'Is it wrong to run away from the fire that scorches you?'

'It would look wrong, at any rate, in this case.'

'Alwyn, Alwyn, take me, I beseech you!' she burst out. 'It is not right in general, I know, but it is such an exceptional instance, this. Why has such a severe strain been put upon me? I was doing no harm, injuring no one, helping many people, and expecting happiness; yet trouble came. Can it be that God holds me in derision? I had no supporter--I gave way; and now my life is a burden and a shame to me . . . Oh, if you only knew how much to me this request to you is--how my life is wrapped up in it, you could not deny me!'

'This is almost beyond endurance--Heaven support us,' he groaned. 'Emmy, you are the Duchess of Hamptonshire, the Duke of Hamptonshire's wife; you must not go with me!'

'And am I then refused?--Oh, am I refused?' she cried frantically.

'Alwyn, Alwyn, do you say it indeed to me?'

'Yes, I do, dear, tender heart! I do most sadly say it. You must not

go. Forgive me, for there is no alternative but refusal. Though I die, though you die, we must not fly together. It is forbidden in God's law. Good-bye, for always and ever!

He tore himself away, hastened from the shrubbery, and vanished among the trees.

Three days after this meeting and farewell, Alwyn, his soft, handsome features stamped with a haggard hardness that ten years of ordinary wear and tear in the world could scarcely have produced, sailed from Plymouth on a drizzling morning, in the passenger-ship Western Glory. When the land had faded behind him he mechanically endeavoured to school himself into a stoical frame of mind. His attempt, backed up by the strong moral staying power that had enabled him to resist the passionate temptation to which Emmeline, in her reckless trustfulness, had exposed him, was rewarded by a certain kind of success, though the murmuring stretch of waters whereon he gazed day after day too often seemed to be articulating to him in tones of her well-remembered voice.

He framed on his journey rules of conduct for reducing to mild proportions the feverish regrets which would occasionally arise and agitate him, when he indulged in visions of what might have been had he not hearkened to the whispers of conscience. He fixed his thoughts for so many hours a day on philosophical passages in the volumes he had brought with him, allowing himself now and then a few minutes' thought of

Emmeline, with the strict yet reluctant niggardliness of an ailing epicure proportioning the rank drinks that cause his malady. The voyage was marked by the usual incidents of a sailing-passage in those days--a storm, a calm, a man overboard, a birth, and a funeral--the latter sad event being one in which he, as the only clergyman on board, officiated, reading the service ordained for the purpose. The ship duly arrived at Boston early in the month following, and thence he proceeded to Providence to seek out a distant relative.

After a short stay at Providence he returned again to Boston, and by applying himself to a serious occupation made good progress in shaking off the dreary melancholy which enveloped him even now. Distracted and weakened in his beliefs by his recent experiences, he decided that he could not for a time worthily fill the office of a minister of religion, and applied for the mastership of a school. Some introductions, given him before starting, were useful now, and he soon became known as a respectable scholar and gentleman to the trustees of one of the colleges. This ultimately led to his retirement from the school and installation in the college as Professor of rhetoric and oratory.

Here and thus he lived on, exerting himself solely because of a conscientious determination to do his duty. He passed his winter evenings in turning sonnets and elegies, often giving his thoughts voice in 'Lines to an Unfortunate Lady,' while his summer leisure at the same hour would be spent in watching the lengthening shadows from his window, and fancifully comparing them with the shades of his own life. If he

walked, he mentally inquired which was the eastern quarter of the landscape, and thought of two thousand miles of water that way, and of what was beyond it. In a word he was at all spare times dreaming of her who was only a memory to him, and would probably never be more.

Nine years passed by, and under their wear and tear Alwyn Hill's face lost a great many of the attractive characteristics which had formerly distinguished it. He was kind to his pupils and affable to all who came in contact with him; but the kernel of his life, his secret, was kept as snugly shut up as though he had been dumb. In talking to his acquaintances of England and his life there, he omitted the episode of Batton Castle and Emmeline as if it had no existence in his calendar at all. Though of towering importance to himself, it had filled but a short and small fragment of time, an ephemeral season which would have been wellnigh imperceptible, even to him, at this distance, but for the incident it enshrined.

One day, at this date, when cursorily glancing over an old English newspaper, he observed a paragraph which, short as it was, contained for him whole tomes of thrilling information--rung with more passion-stirring rhythm than the collected cantos of all the poets. It was an announcement of the death of the Duke of Hamptonshire, leaving behind him a widow, but no children.

The current of Alwyn's thoughts now completely changed. On looking again

at the newspaper he found it to be one that was sent him long ago, and had been carelessly thrown aside. But for an accidental overhauling of the waste journals in his study he might not have known of the event for years. At this moment of reading the Duke had already been dead seven months. Alwyn could now no longer bind himself down to machine-made synecdoche, antithesis, and climax, being full of spontaneous specimens of all these rhetorical forms, which he dared not utter. Who shall wonder that his mind luxuriated in dreams of a sweet possibility now laid open for the first time these many years? for Emmeline was to him now as ever the one dear thing in all the world. The issue of his silent romancing was that he resolved to return to her at the very earliest moment.

But he could not abandon his professional work on the instant. He did not get really quite free from engagements till four months later; but, though suffering throes of impatience continually, he said to himself every day: 'If she has continued to love me nine years she will love me ten; she will think the more tenderly of me when her present hours of solitude shall have done their proper work; old times will revive with the cessation of her recent experience, and every day will favour my return.'

The enforced interval soon passed, and he duly arrived in England, reaching the village of Batton on a certain winter day between twelve and thirteen months subsequent to the time of the Duke's death.

It was evening; yet such was Alwyn's impatience that he could not forbear taking, this very night, one look at the castle which Emmeline had entered as unhappy mistress ten years before. He threaded the park trees, gazed in passing at well-known outlines which rose against the dim sky, and was soon interested in observing that lively country-people, in parties of two and three, were walking before and behind him up the interlaced avenue to the castle gateway. Knowing himself to be safe from recognition, Alwyn inquired of one of these pedestrians what was going on.

'Her Grace gives her tenantry a ball to-night, to keep up the old custom of the Duke and his father before him, which she does not wish to change.'

'Indeed. Has she lived here entirely alone since the Duke's death?'

'Quite alone. But though she doesn't receive company herself, she likes the village people to enjoy themselves, and often has 'em here.'

'Kind-hearted, as always!' thought Alwyn.

On reaching the castle he found that the great gates at the tradesmen's entrance were thrown back against the wall as if they were never to be closed again; that the passages and rooms in that wing were brilliantly lighted up, some of the numerous candles guttering down over the green leaves which decorated them, and upon the silk dresses of the happy

farmers' wives as they passed beneath, each on her husband's arm. Alwyn found no difficulty in marching in along with the rest, the castle being Liberty Hall to-night. He stood unobserved in a corner of the large apartment where dancing was about to begin.

'Her Grace, though hardly out of mourning, will be sure to come down and lead off the dance with neighbour Bates,' said one.

'Who is neighbour Bates?' asked Alwyn.

'An old man she respects much--the oldest of her tenant-farmers. He was seventy-eight his last birthday.'

'Ah, to be sure!' said Alwyn, at his ease. 'I remember.'

The dancers formed in line, and waited. A door opened at the farther end of the hall, and a lady in black silk came forth. She bowed, smiled, and proceeded to the top of the dance.

'Who is that lady?' said Alwyn, in a puzzled tone. 'I thought you told me that the Duchess of Hamptonshire--'

'That is the Duchess,' said his informant.

'But there is another?'

'No; there is no other.'

'But she is not the Duchess of Hamptonshire--who used to--' Alwyn's tongue stuck to his mouth, he could get no farther.

'What's the matter?' said his acquaintance. Alwyn had retired, and was supporting himself against the wall.

The wretched Alwyn murmured something about a stitch in his side from walking. Then the music struck up, the dance went on, and his neighbour became so interested in watching the movements of this strange Duchess through its mazes as to forget Alwyn for a while.

It gave him an opportunity to brace himself up. He was a man who had suffered, and he could suffer again. 'How came that person to be your Duchess?' he asked in a firm, distinct voice, when he had attained complete self-command. 'Where is her other Grace of Hamptonshire? There certainly was another. I know it.'

'Oh, the previous one! Yes, yes. She ran away years and years ago with the young curate. Mr. Hill was the young man's name, if I recollect.'

'No! She never did. What do you mean by that?' he said.

'Yes, she certainly ran away. She met the curate in the shrubbery about a couple of months after her marriage with the Duke. There were folks

who saw the meeting and heard some words of their talk. They arranged to go, and she sailed from Plymouth with him a day or two afterward.'

'That's not true.'

'Then 'tis the queerest lie ever told by man. Her father believed and knew to his dying day that she went with him; and so did the Duke, and everybody about here. Ay, there was a fine upset about it at the time. The Duke traced her to Plymouth.'

'Traced her to Plymouth?'

'He traced her to Plymouth, and set on his spies; and they found that she went to the shipping-office, and inquired if Mr. Alwyn Hill had entered his name as passenger by the Western Glory; and when she found that he had, she booked herself for the same ship, but not in her real name. When the vessel had sailed a letter reached the Duke from her, telling him what she had done. She never came back here again. His Grace lived by himself a number of years, and married this lady only twelve months before he died.'

Alwyn was in a state of indescribable bewilderment. But, unmanned as he was, he called the next day on the, to him, spurious Duchess of Hamptonshire. At first she was alarmed at his statement, then cold, then she was won over by his condition to give confidence for confidence. She showed him a letter which had been found among the papers of the late

Duke, corroborating what Alwyn's informant had detailed. It was from Emmeline, bearing the postmarked date at which the Western Glory sailed, and briefly stated that she had emigrated by that ship to America.

Alwyn applied himself body and mind to unravel the remainder of the mystery. The story repeated to him was always the same: 'She ran away with the curate.' A strangely circumstantial piece of intelligence was added to this when he had pushed his inquiries a little further. There was given him the name of a waterman at Plymouth, who had come forward at the time that she was missed and sought for by her husband, and had stated that he put her on board the Western Glory at dusk one evening before that vessel sailed.

After several days of search about the alleys and quays of Plymouth Barbican, during which these impossible words, 'She ran off with the curate,' became branded on his brain, Alwyn found this important waterman. He was positive as to the truth of his story, still remembering the incident well, and he described in detail the lady's dress, as he had long ago described it to her husband, which description corresponded in every particular with the dress worn by Emmeline on the evening of their parting.

Before proceeding to the other side of the Atlantic to continue his inquiries there, the puzzled and distracted Alwyn set himself to

ascertain the address of Captain Wheeler, who had commanded the Western Glory in the year of Alwyn's voyage out, and immediately wrote a letter to him on the subject.

The only circumstances which the sailor could recollect or discover from his papers in connection with such a story were, that a woman bearing the name which Alwyn had mentioned as fictitious certainly did come aboard for a voyage he made about that time; that she took a common berth among the poorest emigrants; that she died on the voyage out, at about five days' sail from Plymouth; that she seemed a lady in manners and education. Why she had not applied for a first-class passage, why she had no trunks, they could not guess, for though she had little money in her pocket she had that about her which would have fetched it. 'We buried her at sea,' continued the captain. 'A young parson, one of the cabin-passengers, read the burial-service over her, I remember well.'

The whole scene and proceedings darted upon Alwyn's recollection in a moment. It was a fine breezy morning on that long-past voyage out, and he had been told that they were running at the rate of a hundred and odd miles a day. The news went round that one of the poor young women in the other part of the vessel was ill of fever, and delirious. The tidings caused no little alarm among all the passengers, for the sanitary conditions of the ship were anything but satisfactory. Shortly after this the doctor announced that she had died. Then Alwyn had learnt that she was laid out for burial in great haste, because of the danger that would have been incurred by delay. And next the funeral scene rose

before him, and the prominent part that he had taken in that solemn ceremony. The captain had come to him, requesting him to officiate, as there was no chaplain on board. This he had agreed to do; and as the sun went down with a blaze in his face he read amidst them all assembled: 'We therefore commit her body to the deep, to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection of the body when the sea shall give up her dead.'

The captain also forwarded the addresses of the ship's matron and of other persons who had been engaged on board at the date. To these Alwyn went in the course of time. A categorical description of the clothes of the dead truant, the colour of her hair, and other things, extinguished for ever all hope of a mistake in identity.

At last, then, the course of events had become clear. On that unhappy evening when he left Emmeline in the shrubbery, forbidding her to follow him because it would be a sin, she must have disobeyed. She must have followed at his heels silently through the darkness, like a poor pet animal that will not be driven back. She could have accumulated nothing for the journey more than she might have carried in her hand; and thus poorly provided she must have embarked. Her intention had doubtless been to make her presence on board known to him as soon as she could muster courage to do so.

Thus the ten years' chapter of Alwyn Hill's romance wound itself up under his eyes. That the poor young woman in the steerage had been the young

Duchess of Hamptonshire was never publicly disclosed. Hill had no longer any reason for remaining in England, and soon after left its shores with no intention to return. Previous to his departure he confided his story to an old friend from his native town--grandfather of the person who now relates it to you.

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A few members, including the Bookworm, seemed to be impressed by the quiet gentleman's tale; but the member we have called the Spark--who, by the way, was getting somewhat tinged with the light of other days, and owned to eight-and-thirty--walked daintily about the room instead of sitting down by the fire with the majority and said that for his part he preferred something more lively than the last story--something in which such long-separated lovers were ultimately united. He also liked stories that were more modern in their date of action than those he had heard to-day.

Members immediately requested him to give them a specimen, to which the Spark replied that he didn't mind, as far as that went. And though the Vice-President, the Man of Family, the Colonel, and others, looked at their watches, and said they must soon retire to their respective quarters in the hotel adjoining, they all decided to sit out the Spark's story.

DAME THE TENTH--THE HONOURABLE LAURA