THE FOURTH GENERATION.

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By Sir Walter Besant.

Author of "All Sorts and Conditions of Men," "Herr Paulus," "The Master Craftsman," "Armorel of Lyonesse," "The World Went Very Well Then," "All in a Garden Fair," "Children of Gibeon," etc., etc.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PASSING BELL.

The passing bell informed the village that death had come at last to the old man of the Hall. The pride of the people, because no other village in England entertained a recluse who lived by himself in a great house and allowed everything to fall into decay, was taken from them. No more would strangers flock over on Sunday mornings from the nearest town and the villages round, to look over the wall at the tall, stalwart figure pacing his terrace in all weathers with the regularity of a pendulum. In the village house of call the men assembled to hear and tell and whisper what they had heard.

Then the old story was revived—the story which had almost gone out of men's memories—how the poor gentleman, then young, still under thirty, with a fine high temper of his own—it was odd how the fine high temper had got itself remembered—lost in a single day his wife and his brother-in-law, and never held up his head again, nor went out of the house, nor took notice of man, woman, or child, nor took a gun in his hand, nor called his dogs, nor rode to hounds, nor went to church.

These reminiscences had been told a thousand times in the dingy little room of the village public-house. They reeked, like the room, of beer and tobacco and wet garments. For seventy years they had been told in the same words. They had been, so far, that most interesting form of imaginative work—the story without an end. Now the end had arrived and there would be no more to tell.

The bell ceased, the story was finished. Then the door opened and the ci-devant scarer of birds appeared. He limped inside, he closed the door carefully; he looked around the room. He supported himself bravely with his two sticks and he began to speak.

"We're all friends here? All friends? There's nobody here as will carry things to that young man? No."

"Take half-a-pint, Sexton."

"By your leave. Presently, I shall lend a hand to-morrow or next day to digging a grave. We must all come to it. Why not, therefore?"

He looked important, and evidently had something more to say, if he could find a way to say it.

"We're all thinking of the same thing," he began. "It's the old squire who now lies dead, and never went out of the place for seventy long years—as long as I can remember. Why? Because there was a man murdered and a woman died. Who was the murdered man? The squire's brother-in-law. Who murdered him? John Dunning, they said. John Dunning, he was tried and got off, and he went away. Who murdered that man? John Dunning didn't. Why? Because John Dunning didn't go to the wood for two hours afterwards. Who murdered that man, I say?"

At this point he accepted the hospitality of a glass of beer.

"I know who did it. I always have known. Nobody knows but me. I've known for all these years; and I've never told. For why? He would ha' killed me too. For certain sure he would ha' killed me. Who was it then? I'll tell you. It was the man that lies dead over there. It was the squire himself—that's who it was. No one else was in the wood all the morning but the squire and the other gentleman. I say the squire done it; the squire and nobody else. The squire done it. The squire done it."

The men looked at each other in amazement. Then the blacksmith rose and he said, solemnly:

"Thomas, you're close on eighty years of age. You've gone silly in your old age. You and your squire! I remember what my father said, 'The squire, he left Mr Holms at the wood and turned back.' That was the evidence at the inquest and the trial. You and your squire! Go home, Thomas, and go to bed and get your memory back again."

Thomas looked round the room again. The faces of all were hard and unsympathetic. He turned and hobbled out. The days that followed were few and evil, for he could speak about nothing else, and no one heeded his garrulous utterances. Assuredly if there had been a lunatic asylum in the village he would have been enclosed there. A fatal example of the mischief of withholding evidence! Now, had this boy made it clear at the inquest that the two gentlemen were together in the wood for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, one knows not what might have followed.

One of the London morning papers devoted a leading article to the subject of the modern Recluse. The following is a passage from that excellent leader:—

"The Hermit, or the Recluse, has long disappeared from the roadside, from the bridge end, from the river bank. His Hermitage sometimes remains, as at Warkworth, but the ancient occupant is gone. He was succeeded by the Eccentric, who flourished mightily in the last century and took many strange forms; some lived alone, each in a single room; some became misers and crept out at night, to pick up offal for food; some lived in hollow trees. Some never washed and allowed nothing in the house to be washed. There were no absurdities too ridiculous to be practised by the Eccentric of the last century.

"For reasons which the writer of social manners may discover, the Eccentric has mostly followed the Recluse; there are none left. Therefore the life of the late Algernon Campaigne, of Campaigne Park, Bucks, an Eccentric of the eighteenth century type, will afford a pleasing exception to the dull and monotonous chronicles of modern private life.

"This worthy, a country gentleman of good family and large estate, was married in quite early manhood, having succeeded to the property at twenty-one or so. His health was excellent; he was a model of humanity to look at, being much over six feet high and large of frame in proportion. He had gone through the usual course of public school and the University, not without distinction; he had been called to the Bar; he was a magistrate; and he was understood to have ambitions of a Parliamentary career. In a word, no young man ever started with fairer prospects or with a better chance of success in whatever line he proposed to take up.

"Unfortunately a single tragic event blasted these prospects and ruined his life. His brother-in-law, a gentleman of his own rank and station, and his most intimate friend, while on a visit at Campaigne Park, was brutally murdered—by whom it was never discovered. The shock of this event brought the young wife of Mr Campaigne to premature labour, and killed her as well on the same day.

"This misfortune so weighed upon the unhappy man that he fell into a despondent condition, from which he never rallied. He entered into a voluntary retirement from the world. He lived alone in his great house, with no one but an occasional old woman for a housekeeper for the remainder of his life—seventy years. During the whole of that time he has preserved absolute silence; he has not uttered a word. He has neglected his affairs; when his signature was absolutely necessary his agent left the document on his table, and next day found it signed. He would have nothing done to the house; the fine furniture and the noble paintings are reported to be ruined with damp and cold, his garden and glass-houses are overgrown and destroyed. He spent his mornings, in all weathers, walking up and down the brick terrace overlooking his ruined lawns; he dined at one o'clock on a beefsteak and a bottle of port; he slept before the fire all the afternoon, he went to bed at nine. He never opened a book or a newspaper or a letter. He was careless what became of his children, and he refused to see his friends. A more melancholy useless existence can hardly be imagined. And his life he followed without the least change for seventy years. When he died, the day before yesterday, it was on his ninety-fifth birthday."

More followed, but these were the facts, as presented to the readers with a moral to follow.

They buried the old man with his forefathers "in sure and certain hope." The words many pass, perhaps, for he had been punished—if punishment can atone for crime. Constance brought him a message of forgiveness, but could he forgive himself? All manner of sins can be forgiven. The murdered man, the dishonoured woman, the wronged orphan, the sweated workwoman, the ruined shareholder, the innocent man done to death or prison by perjury — all may lift up their hands in pity and cry aloud with tears their forgiveness, but will the guilty man forgive himself? Until he can the glorious streets of the New Jerusalem will be dark, the sound of the harp and the voices of praise will be but a confused noise, and the new life itself will be nothing better than an intolerable prolonging of the old burden.

"Dust to dust, ashes to ashes."

Then they went away, and when they were all gone the old bird-scarer came hobbling to the grave and looked into it and murmured, but not aloud, for fear the man in the grave might arise and kill him too: "You done it! You done it! You done it!"

The funeral party walked back to the house, where for the first time for seventy years there was a table spread. All were there—the ancient lady, daughter of the dead man, stately with her black silk and laces, with the bearing of a Duchess, leaning on the arm of her grand-nephew, the two grandsons, Fred and Christopher, the wife and children of the latter, Mr Samuel Galley and Mary Anne his sister, and Constance, great-grandniece of the deceased. With them came the agent, a solicitor from the neighbouring town.

After luncheon the agent produced the will.

"This will," he said, "was drawn up by my great-grandfather in the year 1826 — exactly one month after the tragic event which so weighed upon his client's mind——"

"Was he in his right mind?" asked Sam, turning very red. "I ask the question without prejudice."

"Sir, he was always in his right mind. He would not speak, but on occasion he would write. He was never, down to the very end, in any sense out of his mind. I have letters and instructions from him, year after year, for seventy years—my firm has acted for this family for a hundred years — which will establish his complete sanity, should that be questioned."

"Well, the Will," said Sam. "Let's get to the Will."

"I will read the Will."

It was for a Will, short. When it was read, they looked at each other.

"Perhaps," said one, "you will explain what the Will means."

"Certainly. The testator had at the time of making his will a certain amount of personal property to bequeath. The property consisted partly of invested moneys, chiefly his mother's fortune. As he was an only child the whole of this fortune came to him. Partly it consisted of a town house in Berkeley Square, his pictures, his library, and his furniture, carriages, horses, etc. The latter part he has bequeathed to the heir of the Campaigne estate—to you, Mr Leonard. The former part, consisting of the invested moneys, he bequeathed to his three children in equal portions. As the second child was drowned and left no heirs, this money will be divided among the heirs of the elder son and the daughter—you, Mrs Galley."

"With all the Accumulations," cried Sam. "Ah!" with a long, long breath of relief.

"No, not the Accumulations. The testator expressly states that the amount standing in his name at that date shall be so divided. 'And,' he continues, 'seeing that I may live some years against my desire, I bequeath all moneys arising out of interest, compound interest, new investments, and interest upon them, to the heirs of Langley Holms, my late brother-in-law, for a reason which he knows.'"

"And we are to have none of the accumulations of our own money?" Sam sprang to his feet. "I give notice I shall dispute the Will."

"As you please, sir."

"Will you tell me," asked Fred, "what is the sum to be divided among us?"

"There was £90,000, more or less, so invested. The half of that sum, or £45,000, will go to this lady, Mrs Galley: the other half, which means £15,000 a piece, to Mr Leonard Campaigne, Mr Frederick Campaigne, and Mr Christopher Campaigne."

"It's only £450 a year," said Fred. "Humph! I can do better in Australia—with my letter." He felt for the pocket-book which contained that letter.

"It's only £450 a year," said Christopher to his son, "we shall do a great deal better with the Bureau."

"And the Accumulations?" asked Samuel, once more. "Who is to have them?"

"They amount to a very large sum of money—very large indeed. The only heir surviving of Mr Langley Holms is, I have just learned," he turned to Constance, "this young lady."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FLOWER OF SYMPATHY.

Leonard and Constance returned to town together. Some of the others stayed to look at the old place—the mouldy rooms, the worm-eaten hangings, the faded pictures, the ruined gardens.

In the carriage the girl sat behind Leonard in silence, her hands folded, her eyes dropped.

"You are a great heiress, Constance," he said. "I learnt that the accumulations now amount to an immense sum. What will you do with all this money?"

"I do not know. I shall pretend to myself that I haven't got any. Perhaps in time someone may help me to use it. I have enough already. I do not want to buy anything that costs large sums. I do not want to dress more expensively, I have as good society as I can desire, and I cannot, I believe, eat any more than I have always done."

"Yet how happy would some people be at such a windfall!"

"The difficulty of doing something with it will be very terrible. Let us never talk about it. Besides, that cousin of yours is going to set the will aside, if he can."

She relapsed into silence. It was not of her newly-acquired fortune that she was thinking.

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