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An Eye for an Eye

Anthony Trollope

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Anthony Trollope
Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany
ISBN: 978-3-8424-8246-3

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CONTENTS

VOLUME I.

INTRODUCTION

- I. SCROOPE MANOR
- II. FRED NEVILLE
- III. SOPHIE MELLERBY
- IV. JACK NEVILLE
- V. ARDKILL COTTAGE
- VI. I'LL GO BAIL SHE LIKES IT
- VII. FATHER MARTY'S HOSPITALITY
- VIII. I DIDN'T WANT YOU TO GO
- IX. FRED NEVILLE RETURNS TO SCROOPE
- X. FRED NEVILLE'S SCHEME
- XI. THE WISDOM OF JACK NEVILLE
- XII. FRED NEVILLE MAKES A PROMISE

VOLUME II.

- I. FROM BAD TO WORSE
- II. IS SHE TO BE YOUR WIFE?
- III. FRED NEVILLE RECEIVES A VISITOR
AT ENNIS
- IV. NEVILLE'S SUCCESS
- V. FRED NEVILLE IS AGAIN CALLED HOME
TO SCROOPE
- VI. THE EARL OF SCROOPE IS IN TROUBLE
- VII. SANS REPROCHE
- VIII. LOOSE ABOUT THE WORLD
- IX. AT LISCANNOR
- X. AT ARDKILL
- XI. ON THE CLIFFS
- XII. CONCLUSION

Volume I.

INTRODUCTION.

At a private asylum in the west of England there lives, and has lived for some years past, an unfortunate lady, as to whom there has long since ceased to be any hope that she should ever live elsewhere. Indeed, there is no one left belonging to her by whom the indulgence of such a hope on her behalf could be cherished. Friends she has none; and her own condition is such, that she recks nothing of confinement and does not even sigh for release. And yet her mind is ever at work,—as is doubtless always the case with the insane. She has present to her, apparently in every waking moment of her existence, an object of intense interest, and at that she works with a constancy which never wearies herself, however fatiguing it may be to those who are near her. She is ever justifying some past action of her life. "An eye for an eye," she says, "and a tooth for a tooth. Is it not the law?" And these words she will repeat daily, almost from morn till night.

It has been said that this poor lady has no friends. Friends who would be anxious for her recovery, who would care to see her even in her wretched condition, who might try to soothe her harassed heart with words of love, she has none. Such is her condition now, and her temperament, that it may be doubted whether any words of love, however tender, could be efficacious with her. She is always demanding justification, and as those who are around her never thwart her she has probably all the solace which kindness could give her.

But, though she has no friends—none who love her,—she has all the material comfort which friendship or even love could supply. All that money can do to lessen her misery, is done. The house in which she lives is surrounded by soft lawns and secluded groves. It has been prepared altogether for the wealthy, and is furnished with every luxury which it may be within the power of a maniac to enjoy. This lady has her own woman to attend her; and the woman, though stout and masterful, is gentle in language and kind in treatment. "An eye for an eye, ma'am. Oh, certainly. That is the law. An eye for an eye, no doubt." This formula she will repeat a dozen

times a day—ay, a dozen dozen times, till the wonder is that she also should not be mad.

The reader need not fear that he is to be asked to loiter within the precincts of an asylum for the insane. Of this abode of wretchedness no word more shall be said; but the story shall be told of the lady who dwelt there,—the story of her life till madness placed her within those walls. That story was known to none at the establishment but to him who was its head. Others there, who were cognisant of the condition of the various patients, only knew that from quarter to quarter the charges for this poor lady's custody were defrayed by the Earl of Scroope.

Chapter I.

SCROOPE MANOR.

Some years ago, it matters not how many, the old Earl of Scroope lived at Scroope Manor in Dorsetshire. The house was an Elizabethan structure of some pretensions, but of no fame. It was not known to sight-seers, as are so many of the residences of our nobility and country gentlemen. No days in the week were appointed for visiting its glories, nor was the housekeeper supposed to have a good thing in perquisites from showing it. It was a large brick building facing on to the village street,—facing the village, if the hall-door of a house be the main characteristic of its face; but with a front on to its own grounds from which opened the windows of the chief apartments. The village of Scroope consisted of a straggling street a mile in length, with the church and parsonage at one end, and the Manor-house almost at the other. But the church stood within the park; and on that side of the street, for more than half its length, the high, gloomy wall of the Earl's domain stretched along in face of the publicans, bakers, grocers, two butchers, and retired private residents whose almost contiguous houses made Scroope itself seem to be more than a village to strangers. Close to the Manor and again near to the church, some favoured few had been allowed to build houses and to cultivate small gardens taken, as it were, in notches out of the Manor grounds; but these tenements must have been built at a time in which landowners were very much less jealous than they are now of such encroachments from their humbler neighbours.

The park itself was large, and the appendages to it such as were fit for an Earl's establishment;—but there was little about it that was attractive. The land lay flat, and the timber, which was very plentiful, had not been made to group itself in picturesque forms. There was the Manor wood, containing some five hundred acres, lying beyond the church and far back from the road, intersected with so-called drives, which were unfit for any wheels but those of timber waggons;—and round the whole park there was a broad belt of

trees. Here and there about the large enclosed spaces there stood solitary oaks, in which the old Earl took pride; but at Scroope Manor there was none of that finished landscape beauty of which the owners of "places" in England are so justly proud.

The house was large, and the rooms were grand and spacious. There was an enormous hall into one corner of which the front door opened. There was a vast library filled with old books which no one ever touched,—huge volumes of antiquated and now all but useless theology, and folio editions of the least known classics,—such as men now never read. Not a book had been added to it since the commencement of the century, and it may almost be said that no book had been drawn from its shelves for real use during the same period. There was a suite of rooms,—a salon with two withdrawing rooms which now were never opened. The big dining-room was used occasionally, as, in accordance with the traditions of the family, dinner was served there whenever there were guests at the Manor. Guests, indeed, at Scroope Manor were not very frequent;—but Lady Scroope did occasionally have a friend or two to stay with her; and at long intervals the country clergymen and neighbouring squires were asked, with their wives, to dinner. When the Earl and his Countess were alone they used a small breakfast parlour, and between this and the big dining-room there was the little chamber in which the Countess usually lived. The Earl's own room was at the back, or if the reader pleases, front of the house, near the door leading into the street, and was, of all rooms in the house, the gloomiest.

The atmosphere of the whole place was gloomy. There were none of those charms of modern creation which now make the mansions of the wealthy among us bright and joyous. There was not a billiard table in the house. There was no conservatory nearer than the large old-fashioned greenhouse, which stood away by the kitchen garden and which seemed to belong exclusively to the gardener. The papers on the walls were dark and sombre. The mirrors were small and lustreless. The carpets were old and dingy. The windows did not open on to the terrace. The furniture was hardly ancient, but yet antiquated and uncomfortable. Throughout the house, and indeed throughout the estate, there was sufficient evidence of wealth; and there certainly was no evidence of parsimony; but at Scroope Manor

money seemed never to have produced luxury. The household was very large. There was a butler, and a housekeeper, and various footmen, and a cook with large wages, and maidens in tribes to wait upon each other, and a colony of gardeners, and a coachman, and a head-groom, and under-grooms. All these lived well under the old Earl, and knew the value of their privileges. There was much to get, and almost nothing to do. A servant might live for ever at Scroope Manor,—if only sufficiently submissive to Mrs. Bunce the housekeeper. There was certainly no parsimony at the Manor, but the luxurious living of the household was confined to the servants' department.

To a stranger, and perhaps also to the inmates, the idea of gloom about the place was greatly increased by the absence of any garden or lawn near the house. Immediately in front of the mansion, and between it and the park, there ran two broad gravel terraces, one above another; and below these the deer would come and browse. To the left of the house, at nearly a quarter of a mile distant from it, there was a very large garden indeed,—flower-gardens, and kitchen-gardens, and orchards; all ugly, and old-fashioned, but producing excellent crops in their kind. But they were away, and were not seen. Oat flowers were occasionally brought into the house,—but the place was never filled with flowers as country houses are filled with them now-a-days. No doubt had Lady Scroope wished for more she might have had more.

Scroope itself, though a large village, stood a good deal out of the world. Within the last year or two a railway has been opened, with a Scroope Road Station, not above three miles from the place; but in the old lord's time it was eleven miles from its nearest station, at Dorchester, with which it had communication once a day by an omnibus. Unless a man had business with Scroope nothing would take him there; and very few people had business with Scroope. Now and then a commercial traveller would visit the place with but faint hopes as to trade. A post-office inspector once in twelve months would call upon plethoric old Mrs. Applejohn, who kept the small shop for stationery, and was known as the postmistress. The two sons of the vicar, Mr. Greenmarsh, would pass backwards and forwards between their father's vicarage and Marlbro' school. And occasionally the men and women of Scroope would make a

journey to their county town. But the Earl was told that old Mrs. Brock of the Scroope Arms could not keep the omnibus on the road unless he would subscribe to aid it. Of course he subscribed. If he had been told by his steward to subscribe to keep the cap on Mrs. Brock's head, he would have done so. Twelve pounds a year his Lordship paid towards the omnibus, and Scroope was not absolutely dissevered from the world.

The Earl himself was never seen out of his own domain, except when he attended church. This he did twice every Sunday in the year, the coachman driving him there in the morning and the head-groom in the afternoon. Throughout the household it was known to be the Earl's request to his servants that they would attend divine service at least once every Sunday. None were taken into service but they who were or who called themselves members of the Church Establishment. It is hardly probable that many dissenters threw away the chance of such promotion on any frivolous pretext of religion. Beyond this request, which, coming from the mouth of Mrs. Bunce, became very imperative, the Earl hardly ever interfered with his domestics. His own valet had attended him for the last thirty years; but, beyond his valet and the butler, he hardly knew the face of one of them. There was a gamekeeper at Scroope Manor, with two under-gamekeepers; and yet, for, some years, no one, except the gamekeepers, had ever shot over the lands. Some partridges and a few pheasants were, however, sent into the house when Mrs. Bunce, moved to wrath, would speak her mind on that subject.

The Earl of Scroope himself was a tall, thin man, something over seventy at the time of which I will now begin to speak. His shoulders were much bent, but otherwise he appeared to be younger than his age. His hair was nearly white, but his eyes were still bright, and the handsome well-cut features of his fine face were not reduced to shapelessness by any of the ravages of time, as is so often the case with men who are infirm as well as old. Were it not for the long and heavy eyebrows, which gave something of severity to his face, and for that painful stoop in his shoulders, he might still have been accounted a handsome man. In youth he had been a very handsome man, and had shone forth in the world, popular, beloved, respected, with all the good things the world could give. The first blow upon him was the death of his wife. That hurt him sorely, but it did not

quite crush him. Then his only daughter died also, just as she became a bride. High as the Lady Blanche Neville had stood herself, she had married almost above her rank, and her father's heart had been full of joy and pride. But she had perished childless,—in childbirth, and again he was hurt almost to death. There was still left to him a son,—a youth indeed thoughtless, lavish, and prone to evil pleasures. But thought would come with years; for almost any lavishness there were means sufficient; and evil pleasures might cease to entice. The young Lord Neville was all that was left to the Earl, and for his heir he paid debts and forgave injuries. The young man would marry and all might be well. Then he found a bride for his boy,—with no wealth, but owning the best blood in the kingdom, beautiful, good, one who might be to him as another daughter. His boy's answer was that he was already married! He had chosen his wife from out of the streets, and offered to the Earl of Scroope as a child to replace the daughter who had gone, a wretched painted prostitute from France. After that Lord Scroope never again held up his head.

The father would not see his heir,—and never saw him again. As to what money might be needed, the lawyers in London were told to manage that. The Earl himself would give nothing and refuse nothing. When there were debts,—debts for the second time, debts for the third time, the lawyers were instructed to do what in their own eyes seemed good to them. They might pay as long as they deemed it right to pay, but they might not name Lord Neville to his father.

While things were thus the Earl married again,—the penniless daughter of a noble house,—a woman not young, for she was forty when he married her, but more than twenty years his junior. It sufficed for him that she was noble, and as he believed good. Good to him she was,—with a duty that was almost excessive. Religious she was, and self-denying; giving much and demanding little; keeping herself in the background, but possessing wonderful energy in the service of others. Whether she could in truth be called good the reader may say when he has finished this story.

Then, when the Earl had been married some three years to his second wife, the heir died. He died, and as far as Scroope Manor was

concerned there was an end of him and of the creature he had called his wife. An annuity was purchased for her. That she should be entitled to call herself Lady Neville while she lived, was the sad necessity of the condition. It was understood by all who came near the Earl that no one was to mention her within his hearing. He was thankful that no heir had come from that most horrid union. The woman was never mentioned to him again, nor need she trouble us further in the telling of our chronicle.

But when Lord Neville died, it was necessary that the old man should think of his new heir. Alas; in that family, though there was much that was good and noble, there had ever been intestine feuds,—causes of quarrel in which each party would be sure that he was right. They were a people who thought much of the church, who were good to the poor, who strove to be noble;—but they could not forgive injuries. They could not forgive even when there were no injuries. The present Earl had quarrelled with his brother in early life;—and had therefore quarrelled with all that had belonged to the brother. The brother was now gone, leaving two sons behind him,—two young Nevilles, Fred and Jack, of whom Fred, the eldest, was now the heir. It was at last settled that Fred should be sent for to Scroope Manor. Fred came, being at that time a lieutenant in a cavalry regiment,—a fine handsome youth of five and twenty, with the Neville eyes and Neville finely cut features. Kindly letters passed between the widowed mother and the present Lady Scroope; and it was decided at last, at his own request, that he should remain one year longer in the army, and then be installed as the eldest son at Scroope Manor. Again the lawyer was told to do what was proper in regard to money.

A few words more must be said of Lady Scroope, and then the preface to our story will be over. She too was an Earl's daughter, and had been much loved by our Earl's first wife. Lady Scroope had been the elder by ten years; but yet they had been dear friends, and Lady Mary Wycombe had passed many months of her early life amidst the gloom of the great rooms at Scroope Manor. She had thus known the Earl well before she consented to marry him. She had never possessed beauty,—and hardly grace. She was strong featured, tall, with pride clearly written in her face. A reader of faces would have declared at once that she was proud of the blood

which ran in her veins. She was very proud of her blood, and did in truth believe that noble birth was a greater gift than any wealth. She was thoroughly able to look down upon a parvenu millionaire, — to look down upon such a one and not to pretend to despise him. When the Earl's letter came to her asking her to share his gloom, she was as poor as Charity, — dependent on a poor brother who hated the burden of such claim. But she would have wedded no commoner, let his wealth and age have been as they might. She knew Lord Scroope's age, and she knew the gloom of Scroope Manor; — and she became his wife. To her of course was told the story of the heir's marriage, and she knew that she could expect no light, no joy in the old house from the scions of the rising family. But now all this was changed, and it might be that she could take the new heir to her heart.

