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## FATHER STAFFORD.

### CHAPTER I.

## Eugene Lane and his Guests.

The world considered Eugene Lane a very fortunate young man; and if youth, health, social reputation, a seat in Parliament, a large income, and finally the promised hand of an acknowledged beauty can make a man happy, the world was right. It is true that Sir Roderick Ayre had been heard to pity the poor chap on the ground that his father had begun life in the workhouse; but everybody knew that Sir Roderick was bound to exalt the claims of birth, inasmuch as he had to rely solely upon them for a reputation, and discounted the value of his opinion accordingly. After all, it was not as if the late Mr. Lane had ended life in the undesirable shelter in question. On the contrary, his latter days had been spent in the handsome mansion of Millstead Manor; and, as he lay on his deathbed, listening to the Rector's gentle homily on the vanity of riches, his eyes would wander to the window and survey a wide tract of land that he called his own, and left, together with immense sums of money, to his son, subject only to a jointure for his wife. It is hard to blame the tired old man if he felt, even with the homily ringing in his ears, that he had not played his part in the world badly.

Millstead Manor was indeed the sort of place to raise a doubt as to the utter vanity of riches. It was situated hard by the little village of Millstead, that lies some forty miles or so northwest of London, in the middle of rich country. The neighborhood afforded shooting, fishing, and hunting, if not the best of their kind, yet good enough to satisfy reasonable people. The park was large and well wooded; the house had insisted on remaining picturesque in spite of Mr. Lane's improvements, and by virtue of an indelible stamp of antiquity had carried its point. A house that dates from Elizabeth is not to be entirely put to shame by one or two unblushing French windows and other trifling barbarities of that description, more especially when it is kept in countenance by a little church of still greater

age, nestling under its wing in a manner that recalled the good old days when the lord of the manor was lord of the souls and bodies of his tenants. Even old Mr. Lane had been mellowed by the influence of his new home, and before his death had come to play the part of Squire far more respectably than might be imagined. Eugene sustained the *rôle* with the graceful indolence and careless efficiency that marked most of his doings.

He stood one Saturday morning in the latter part of July on the steps that led from the terrace to the lawn, holding a letter in his hand and softly whistling. In appearance he was not, it must be admitted, an ideal Squire, for he was but a trifle above middle height, rather slight, and with the little stoop that tells of the man who is town-bred and by nature more given to indoor than outdoor exercises; but he was a good-looking fellow for all that, with a bright humorous face,—though at this moment rather a bored one,—large eyes set well apart, and his proper allowance of brown hair and white teeth. Altogether, it may safely be said that, not even Sir Roderick's nose could have sniffed the workhouse in the young master of Millstead Manor.

Still whistling, Eugene descended the steps and approached a group of people sitting under a large copper-beech tree. A still, hot summer morning does not incline the mind or the body to activity, and all of them had sunk into attitudes of ease. Mrs. Lane's work was reposing in her lap; her sister, Miss Jane Chambers, had ceased the pretense of reading; the Rector was enjoying what he kept assuring himself was only just five minutes' peace before he crossed over to his parsonage and his sermon; Lady Claudia Territon and Miss Katharine Bernard were each in possession of a wicker lounge, while at their feet lay two young men in flannels, with lawn-tennis racquets lying idle by them. A large jug of beer close to the elbow of one of them completed the luxurious picture that was framed in a light cloud of tobacco smoke, traceable to the person who also was obviously responsible for the beer.

As Eugene approached, a sudden thought seemed to strike him. He stopped deliberately, and with great care lit a cigar.

"Why wasn't I smoking, I wonder!" he said. "The sight of Bob Territon reminded me." Then as he reached them, raising his voice, he went on:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry to interrupt you, and with bad news."

"What is the matter, dear," asked Mrs. Lane, a gentle old lady, who having once had the courage to leave the calm of her father's country vicarage to follow the doubtful fortunes of her husband, was now reaping her reward in a luxury of which she had never dreamed.

"With the arrival of the 4.15 this afternoon," Eugene continued, "our placid life will be interrupted, and one of Mr. Eugene Lane, M.P.'s, celebrated Saturday to Monday parties (I quote from *The Universe*) will begin."

"Who's coming?" asked Miss Bernard.

Miss Bernard was the acknowledged beauty referred to in the opening lines of this chapter, whose love Eugene had been lucky enough to secure. Had Eugene not been absurdly rich himself, he might have been congratulated further on the prospective enjoyment of a nice little fortune as well as the lady's favor.

"Is Rickmansworth coming?" put in Lady Claudia, before Eugene had time to reply to his *fiancée*.

"Be at peace," he said, addressing Lady Claudia; "your brother is not coming. I have known Rickmansworth a long while, and I never knew him to be polite. He inquired by telegram (reply not paid) who were to be here. When I wired him, telling him whom I had the privilege of entertaining, and requesting an immediate reply (not paid), he answered that he thought I must have enough Territons already, and he didn't want to make another."

Neither Lady Claudia nor her brother Robert, who was the young man with the beer, seemed put out at this message. Indeed, the latter went so far as to say:

"Good! Have some beer, Eugene?"

"But who is coming?" repeated Miss Kate. "Really, Eugene, you might pay a little attention to me."

"Can't, my dear Kate—not in public. It's not good form, is it, Lady Claudia?"

"Eugene," said Mrs. Lane, in a tone as nearly severe as she ever arrived at, "if you wish your guests to have either dinner or beds, you will at once tell me who and how many they are."

"My dear mother, they are in number five, composed as follows: First, the Bishop of Bellminster."

"A most interesting man," observed Miss Chambers.

"I am glad to hear it, Aunt Jane," responded Eugene. "The Bishop is accompanied by his wife. That makes two; and then old Merton, who was at the Colonial Office you know, and Morewood the painter make four."

"Sir George Merton is a Radical, isn't he?" asked Lady Claudia severely.

"He tries to be," said Eugene. "Shall I order a carriage to take you to the station? I think, you know, you can stand it, with Haddington's help."

Mr. Spencer Haddington, the other young man in flannels, was a very rising member of the Conservative party, of which Lady Claudia conceived herself to be a pillar. Identity of political views, in Mr. Haddington's opinion, might well pave the way to a closer union, and this hope accounted for his having consented to pair with Eugene, who sat on the other side, and spend the last week in idleness at Millstead.

"Well," said Mr. Robert Territon, "it sounds slow, old man."

"Candid family, the Territons," remarked Eugene to the copper-beech.

"Who's the fifth? you've only told us four," said Kate, who always stuck to the point.

"The fifth is—" Eugene paused a moment, as though preparing a sensation; "the fifth is—Father Stafford."

Now it was a remarkable thing that all the ladies looked up quickly and re-echoed the name of the last guest in accents of awe, whereas the men seemed unaffected.

"Why, where did you pick *him* up?" asked Lady Claudia.

"Pick him up! I've known Charley Stafford since we were both that high. We were at Harrow and at Oxford together. Rickmansworth knows him, Bob. You didn't come till he'd left."

"Why is the gentleman called 'Father'?" said Bob.

"Because he is a priest," Miss Chambers answered. "And really, Mr. Territon, you're very ignorant. Everybody knows Father Stafford. You do, Mr. Haddington?"

"Yes," said Haddington, "I've heard of him. He's an Anglican Father, isn't he? Had a big parish somewhere down the Mile End Road?"

"Yes," said Eugene. "He's an old and a great friend of mine. He's quite knocked up, poor old chap, and had to get leave of absence; and I've made him promise to come and stay here for a good part of the time, to rest."

"Then he's not going off again on Monday?" asked Mrs. Lane.

"Oh, I hope not. He's writing a book or something, that will keep him from being restless."

"How charming!" said Lady Claudia. "Don't you dote on him, Kate? Please, Mr. Lane, may I stay too?"

"By the way," said Eugene, "Stafford has taken a vow of celibacy."

"I knew that," said Lady Claudia imperturbably.

Eugene looked mournful; Bob Territon groaned tragically; but Lady Claudia was quite unmoved, and, turning to the Rector, who sat smiling benevolently on the young people, asked:

"Do you know Father Stafford, Dr. Dennis?"

"No. I should be much interested in meeting him. I've heard so much of his work and his preaching."

"Yes," said Lady Claudia, "and his penances and fasting, and so on."

"Poor old Stafford!" said Eugene. "It's quite enough for him that a thing's pleasant to make it wrong."

"Not your philosophy, Master Eugene!" said the Rector.

"No, Doctor."

"But what's this vow?" asked Kate.

"There's no such thing as a binding vow of celibacy in the Anglican Church," announced Miss Chambers.

"Is that right, Doctor?" said Lady Claudia.

"God bless me, my dear," said the Rector, "I don't know. There wasn't in my time."

"But, Eugene, surely I'm right," persisted Aunt Jane. "His Bishop can dispense him from it, can't he?"

"Don't know," answered Eugene. "He says he can."

"Who says he can?"

"Why, the Bishop!"

"Well, then, of course he can."

"All right," said Eugene; "only Stafford doesn't think so. Not that he wants to be released. He doesn't care a bit about women—very ungrateful, as they're all mad about him."

"That's very rude, Eugene," said Kate, in reproving tones. "Admiration for a saint is not madness. Shall we go in, Claudia, and leave these men to pipes and beer?"

"One for you, Rector!" chuckled Bob Territon, who knew no reverence.

The two girls departed somewhat scornfully, arm in arm, and the Rector too rose with a sigh, and accompanied the elder ladies to the house, whither they were going to meet the pony carriage that stood at the hall door. A daily drive was part of Mrs. Lane's ritual.

"By the way, you fellows," Eugene resumed, throwing himself on the grass, "I may as well mention that Stafford doesn't drink, or eat meat, or smoke, or play cards, or anything else."

"What a peculiar beggar!" said Bob.

"Yes, and he's peculiar in another way," said Eugene, a little dryly; "he particularly objects to any remark being made on his habits—I mean on what he eats and drinks and so on."

"There I agree," said Bob; "I object to any remarks on what I eat and drink"; and he took a long pull at the beer.

"You must treat him with respect, young man. Haddington, I know, will study him as a phenomenon. I can't protect him against that."

Mr. Haddington smiled and remarked that such revivals of mediævalism were interesting, if morbid; and having so delivered himself, he too went his way.

"That chap's considered very clever, isn't he?" asked Bob of his host, indicating Haddington's retreating figure.

"Very, I believe," said Eugene. "He's a cuckoo, you see."

"Dashed if I do," said Bob.

"He steals other birds' nests—eggs and all."

"Your natural history is a trifle mixed, old fellow; kindly explain."

"Well, he's a thief of ideas. Never was the father of one himself, and gets his living by kidnapping."

"I never knew such a chap!" ejaculated Bob helplessly. "Why can't you say plainly that you think he's an ass?"

"I don't," said Eugene. "He's by no means an ass. He's a very clever fellow. But he lives on other men's ideas!"

"Oh! come and play billiards."

"I can't," said Eugene gravely. "I'm going to read poetry to Kate."

"By Jove, does she make you do that?"

Eugene nodded sadly, and Bob went off into a fit of obtrusive chuckling. Eugene cast a large cushion dexterously at him and caught him just in the mouth, and, still sadly, rose and went in search of his lady-love.

"Why the dickens does he marry that girl?" exclaimed Bob. "It beats me."

Bob Territon was not the only person in whom Eugene's engagement to Kate Bernard inspired some surprise. But neither he nor any one else succeeded in formulating very definite reasons for the feeling. Kate was a beauty, and a beauty of a type undeniably orthodox and almost aristocratic. She was tall and slight, her nose was the least trifle arched, her fingers tapered, and so, it was believed, did her feet. Her hair was golden, her mouth was small, and her accomplishments considerable. From her childhood she had been considered clever, and had vindicated her reputation by gaining more than one certificate from the various examining bodies which nowadays go up and down seeking whom they may devour. All these varied excellences Eugene had had full opportunities of appreciating, for Kate was a distant cousin of his on the mother's side, and had spent a large part of the last few years at the Manor. It was, in fact, so obviously the duty of the two young people to fall in love with one another, that the surprise exhibited by their friends could only have been based on a somewhat cynical view of humanity. The cynics ought to have considered themselves confuted by the *fait accompli*, but they refused to do so, and, led by Sir Roderick Ayre, had been known to descend to laying five to four against the permanency of the engagement—an obviously coarse and improper proceeding.

It is possible that the odds might have risen a point or two, had these reprehensible persons been present at the little scene which occurred on the terrace, whither the girls had betaken themselves, and Eugene in his turn repaired when he had armed himself with Tennyson. As he approached Claudia rose to go and leave the lovers to themselves.

"Don't go, Lady Claudia," said Eugene. "I'm not going to read anything you ought not to hear."

Of course it was the right thing for Claudia to go, and she knew it. But she was a mischievous body, and the sight of a cloud on Kate's brow had upon her exactly the opposite effect to what it ought to have had.

"You don't really want me to stay, do you? Wouldn't you two rather be alone?" she asked.

"Much rather have you," Eugene answered.

Kate rose with dignity.

"We need not discuss that," she said. "I have letters to write, and am going indoors."

"Oh, I say, Kate, don't do that! I came out on purpose to read to you."

"Lady Claudia is quite ready to make an audience for you," was the chilling reply, as Kate vanished through the open door.

"There, you've done it now!" said Eugene. "You really ought not to insist on staying."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Lane. But it's all your fault." And Claudia tried to make her face assume a look of gravity.

A pause ensued, and then they both smiled.

"What were you going to read?" asked Claudia.

"Oh, Tennyson—always read Tennyson. Kate likes it, because she thinks it's simple."

"You flatter yourself that you see the deeper meaning?"

Eugene smiled complacently.

"And you mean Kate doesn't? I'm glad I'm not engaged to you, Mr. Lane, if that's the kind of thing you say."

Eugene opened his mouth, shut it again, and then said blandly:

"So am I."

"Thank you! You need not be afraid."

"If I were engaged to you, I mightn't like you so well."

A slight blush became visible on Claudia's usually pale cheek.

Eugene looked away toward the horizon.

"I like the way quite pale people blush," he said.

"What do you want, Mr. Lane?"

"Ah! I see you appreciate my character. I want many things I can't have—a great many."

"No doubt," said Claudia, still blushing under the mournful gaze which accompanied those words. "Do you want anything you can have?"

"Yes! I want you to stay several more weeks."

"I'm going to stay." said Claudia.

"How kind!" exclaimed Eugene.

"Do you know why?"

"My modesty forbids me to think."

"I want, to see a lot of Father Stafford! Good-by, Mr. Lane. I'll leave you to your private and particular understanding of Tennyson."

"Claudia!"

"Hold your tongue," she whispered, in tones of exasperation. "It's very wicked and very impertinent—and the library door's open, and Kate's in there!"

Eugene fell back in his chair with a horrified look, and Claudia rushed into the house.

## CHAPTER II.

### New Faces and Old Feuds.

There was, no doubt, some excuse for the interest that the ladies at Millstead Manor had betrayed on hearing the name of Father Stafford. In these days, when the discussion of theological topics has emerged from the study into the street, there to jostle persons engaged in their lawful business, a man who makes for himself a position as a prominent champion of any view becomes, to a considerable extent, a public character; and Charles Stafford's career had excited much notice. Although still a young man but little past thirty, he was adored by a powerful body of followers, and received the even greater compliment of hearty detestation from all, both within and without the Church, to whom his views seemed dangerous and pernicious. He had administered a large parish with distinction; he

had written a treatise of profound patristic learning and uncompromising sacerdotal pretensions. He had defended the institution of a celibate priesthood, and was known to have treated the Reformation with even less respect than it has been of late accustomed to receive. He had done more than all this: he had impressed all who met him with a character of absolute devotion and disinterestedness, and there were many who thought that a successor to the saints might be found in Stafford, if anywhere in this degenerate age. Yet though he was, or was thought to be, all this, his friends were yet loud in declaring—and ever foremost among them Eugene Lane—that a better, simpler, or more modest man did not exist. For the weakness of humanity, it may be added that Stafford's appearance gave him fully the external aspect most suitable to the part his mind urged him to play; for he was tall and spare; his fine-cut face, clean shaven, displayed the penetrating eyes, prominent nose, and large mobile mouth that the memory associates with pictures of Italian prelates who were also statesmen. These personal characteristics, combined with his attitude on Church matters, caused him to be familiarly known among the flippant by the nickname of the Pope.

Eugene Lane stood upon his hearthrug, conversing with the Bishop of Bellminster and covertly regarding his betrothed out of the corner of an apprehensive eye. They had not met alone since the morning, and he was naturally anxious to find out whether that unlucky "Claudia" had been overheard. Claudia herself was listening to the conversation of Mr. Morewood, the well-known artist; and Stafford, who had only arrived just before dinner, was still busy in answering Mrs. Lane's questions about his health. Sir George Merton had failed at the last moment, "like a Radical," said Claudia.

"I am extremely interested in meeting your friend Father Stafford," said the Bishop.

"Well, he's a first-rate fellow," replied Eugene. "I'm sure you'll like him."

"You young fellows call him the Pope, don't you?" asked his lordship, who was a genial man.

"Yes. You don't mind, do you? It's not as if we called him the Archbishop of Canterbury, you know."

"I shouldn't consider even that very personal," said the Bishop, smiling.

Dinner was announced. Eugene gave the Bishop's wife his arm, whispering to Claudia as he passed, "Age before impudence"; and that young lady found that she had fallen to the lot of Stafford, whereat she was well pleased. Kate was paired with Haddington, and Mr. Morewood with Aunt Jane. The Bishop, of course, escorted the hostess.

"And who," said he, almost as soon as he was comfortably settled to his soup, "is the young lady sitting by our friend the Father – the one, I mean, with dark hair, not Miss Bernard? I know her."

"That's Lady Claudia Territon," said Mrs. Lane. "Very pretty, isn't she? and really a very good girl."

"Do you say 'really' because, unless you did, I shouldn't believe it?" he asked, with a smile.

Mrs. Lane had been moved by this idea, but not consciously and, a little distressed at suspecting herself of an unkindness, entertained the Bishop with an entirely fanciful catalogue of Claudia's virtues, which, being overheard by Bob Territon, who had no lady, and was at liberty to listen, occasioned him immense entertainment.

Claudia, meanwhile, was drifting into a state of some annoyance. Stafford was very courteous and attentive, but he drank nothing, and apparently proposed to dine off dry bread. When she began to question him about his former parish, instead of showing the gratitude that might be expected, he smiled a smile that she found pleasure in describing as inscrutable, and said:

"Please don't talk down to me, Lady Claudia."

"I have been taught," responded Claudia, rather stiffly, "to talk about subjects in which my company is presumably interested."

Stafford looked at her with some surprise. It must be admitted that he had become used to more submission than Claudia seemed inclined to give him.

"I beg your pardon. You are quite right. Let us talk about it."

"No, I won't. We will talk about you. You've been very ill, Father Stafford?"

"A little knocked up."

"I don't wonder!" she said, with an irritated glance at his plate, which was now furnished with a potato.

He saw the glance.

"It wasn't that," he said; "that suits me very well."

Claudia knew that a pretty girl may say most things, so she said:

"I don't believe it. You're killing yourself. Why don't you do as the Bishop does?"

The Bishop, good man, was at this moment drinking champagne.

"Men have different ways of living," he answered evasively.

"I think yours is a very bad way. Why do you do it?"

"I'm sure you will forgive me if I decline to discuss the question just now. I notice you take a little wine. You probably would not care to explain why."

"I take it because I like it."

"And I don't take it because I like it."

Claudia had a feeling that she was being snubbed, and her impression was confirmed when Stafford, a moment afterward, turned to Kate Bernard, who sat on his left hand, and was soon deep in reminiscences of old visits to the Manor, with which Kate contrived to intermingle a little flattery that Stafford recognized only to ignore. They had known one another well in earlier days, and Kate was immensely pleased at finding her playfellow both famous and not forgetful.

Eugene looked on from his seat at the foot of the table with silent wonder. Here was a man who might and indeed ought to talk to Claudia, and yet was devoting himself to Kate.

"I suppose it's on the same principle that he takes water instead of champagne," he thought; but the situation amused him, and he darted at Claudia a look that conveyed to that young lady the urgent idea that she was, as boys say, "dared" to make Father Stafford

talk to her. This was quite enough. Helped by the unconscious alliance of Haddington, who thought Miss Bernard had let him alone quite long enough, she seized her opportunity, and said in the softest voice:

"Father Stafford?"

Stafford turned his head, and found fixed upon him a pair of large, dark eyes, brimming over with mingled contrition and admiration.

"I am so sorry — but — but I thought you looked so ill."

Stafford was unpleasantly conscious of being human. The triumph of wickedness is a spectacle from which we may well avert our eyes. Suffice it to say that a quarter of an hour later Claudia returned Eugene's glance with a look of triumph and scorn.

Meanwhile, trouble had arisen between the Bishop and Mr. Morewood. Morewood was an artist of great ability, originality, and skill; and if he had not attained the honors of the Academy, it was perhaps more of his own fault than that of the exalted body in question, as he always treated it with an ostentatious contumely. After all, the Academy must be allowed its feelings. Moreover, his opinions on many subjects were known to be extreme, and he was not chary of displaying them. He was sitting on Mrs. Lane's left, opposite the Bishop, and the latter had started with his hostess a discussion of the relation between religion and art. All went harmoniously for a time; they agreed that religion had ceased to inspire art, and that it was a very regrettable thing; and there, one would have thought the subject — not being a new one — might well have been left. Suddenly, however, Mr. Morewood broke in:

"Religion has ceased to inspire art because it has lost its own inspiration, and having so ceased, it has lost its only use."

The Bishop was annoyed. A well-bred man himself, he disliked what seemed to him ill-bred attacks on opinions which his position proclaimed him to hold.

"You cannot expect me to assent to either of your propositions, Mr. Morewood," he said. "If I believed them, you know, I should not be in the place I am."