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THE CROCK OF GOLD.

CHAPTER I.

THE LABOURER; AND HIS DAWNING DIS-CONTENT.

Roger Acton woke at five. It was a raw March morning, still dark, and bitterly cold, while at gusty intervals the rain beat in against the crazy cottage-window. Nevertheless, from his poor pallet he must up and rouse himself, for it will be open weather by sunrise, and his work lies two miles off; Master Jennings is not the man to show him favour if he be late, and Roger cannot afford to lose an hour: so he shook off the luxury of sleep, and rose again to toil with weary effort.

"Honest Roger," as the neighbours called him, was a fair specimen of a class which has been Britain's boast for ages, and may be still again, in measure, but at present that glory appears to be departing: a class much neglected, much enduring; thoroughly English—just, industrious, and patient; true to the altar, and loyal to the throne; though haply shaken somewhat now from both those noble faiths—warped in their principles, and blunted in their feelings, by lying doctrines and harsh economies; a class—I hate the cold cant term—a race of honourable men, full of cares, pains, privations—but of pleasures next to none; whose life at its most prosperous estate is labour, and in death we count him happy who did not die a pauper. Through them, serfs of the soil, the earth yields indeed her increase, but it is for others; from the fields of plenty they glean a scanty pittance, and fill the barns to bursting, while their children cry for bread. Not that Roger for his part often wanted work; he was the best hand in the parish, and had earned of his employers long ago the name of Steady Acton; but the fair wages for a fair day's labour were quite another thing, and the times went very hard for him and his. A man himself may starve, while his [Pg 013]industry makes others fat: and a liberal landlord all the winter through may keep

his labourers in work, while a crafty, overbearing bailiff mulcts them in their wages.

For the outward man, Acton stood about five feet ten, a gaunt, spare, and sinewy figure, slightly bent; his head sprinkled with gray; his face marked with those rigid lines, which tell, if not of positive famine, at least of too much toil on far too little food; in his eye, patience and good temper; in his carriage, a mixture of the sturdy bearing, necessary to the habitual exercise of great muscular strength, together with that gait of humility — almost humiliation — which is the seal of oppression upon poverty. He might be about forty, or from that to fifty, for hunger, toil, and weather had used him the roughest; while, for all beside, the patched and well-worn smock, the heavily-clouted high-laced boots, a dingy worsted neck-tie, and an old felt hat, complete the picture of externals.

But, for the matter of character within, Roger is quite another man. If his rank in this world is the lowest, many potentates may envy him his state elsewhere. His heart is as soft, as his hand is horny; with the wandering gipsy or the tramping beggar, thrust aside, perhaps deservedly, as impudent impostors from the rich man's gate, has he often-times shared his noon-day morsel: upright and sincere himself, he thinks as well of others: he scarcely ever heard the Gospels read in church, specially about Eastertide, but the tears would trickle down his weather-beaten face: he loves children — his neighbour's little ones as well as his own: he will serve any one for goodness' sake without reward or thanks, and is kind to the poor dumb cattle: he takes quite a pride in his little rod or two of garden, and is early and late at it, both before and after the daily sum of labour: he picks up a bit of knowledge here and there, and somehow has contrived to amass a fund of information for which few would give him credit from his common looks; and he joins to that stock of facts a natural shrewdness to use his knowledge wisely. Though with little of what is called sentiment, or poetry, or fancy in his mind (for harsh was the teaching of his childhood, and meagre the occasions of self-culture ever since), the beauty of creation is by no means lost upon him, and he notices at times its wisdom too. With a fixed habit of manly piety ever on his lips and ever in his heart, he recognises Providence in all things, just, and wise, and good. More than so; simply as a little child who endures the school-

hour for the prospect of his play-time, Roger Acton bears up with noble meekness [Pg 014]against present suffering, knowing that his work and trials and troubles are only for a little while, but his rest and his reward remain a long hereafter. He never questioned this; he knew right well Who had earned it for him; and he lived grateful and obedient, filling up the duties of his humble station. This was his faith, and his works followed it. He believed that God had placed him in his lot, to be a labourer, and till God's earth, and, when his work is done, to be sent on better service in some happier sphere: the where, or the how, did not puzzle him, any more than divers other enigmatical whys and wherefores of his present state; he only knew this, that it would all come right at last: and, barring sin (which he didn't comprehend), somehow all was right at present. What if poverty pinched him? he was a great heir still; what if oppression bruised him? it would soon be over. He trusted to his Pilot, like the landsman in a storm; to his Father, as an infant in the dark. For guilt, he had a Saviour, and he thought of him in penitence; for trouble, a Guardian, and he looked to him in peace; and as for toil, back-breaking toil, there was another Master whom he served with spade, and mattock, and a thankful heart, while he only seemed to be working for the landlord or his bailiff.

Such a man then had been Roger Acton from his youth up till now, or, if sadness must be told, nearly until now; for, to speak truth, his heart at times would fail him, and of late he had been bitter in repinings and complaint. For a day or two, in particular, he had murmured loudly. It was hard, very hard, that an honest, industrious man, as he was, should so scantily pick a living out of this rich earth: after all said, let the parson preach as he will, it's a fine thing to have money, and that his reverence knows right well, or he wouldn't look so closely for his dues. [N.B. Poor Mr. Evans was struggling as well as he could to bring up six children, on a hundred and twenty pounds per annum.] Roger, too, was getting on in years, with a blacker prospect for the future than when he first stood behind a plough-tail. Then there were many wants unsatisfied, which a bit of gold might buy; and his wife teased him to be doing something better. Thus was it come at length to pass, that, although he had endured so many years, he now got discontented at his penury;—what human heart can blame him?—and with murmurings

came doubt; with doubt of Providence, desire of lucre; so the sunshine of religion faded from his path;—what mortal mind can wonder?

[Pg 015]

CHAPTER II.

THE FAMILY; THE HOME; AND MORE RE-PININGS.

Now, if Malthus and Martineau be verily the pundits that men think them, Roger had twice in his life done a very foolish thing: he had sinned against society, statistics, and common sense, by a two-fold marriage. The wife of his youth (I am afraid he married early) had once been kitchen-maid at the Hall; but the sudden change from living luxuriously in a great house, to the griping poverty of a cotter's hovel, had changed, in three short years, the buxom country girl into an emaciated shadow of her former self, and the sorrowing husband buried her in her second child-bed. The powers of the parish clapped their hands; political economy was glad; prudence chuckled; and a coarse-featured farmer (he meant no ill), who occasionally had given Roger work, heartlessly bade him be thankful that his cares were the fewer and his incumbrance was removed; "Ay, and Heaven take the babies also to itself," the Herodian added. But Acton's heart was broken! scarcely could he lift up his head; and his work, though sturdy as before, was more mechanical, less high-motived: and many a year of dreary widowhood he mourned a loss all the greater, though any thing but bitterer, for the infants so left motherless. To these, now grown into a strapping youth and a bright-eyed graceful girl, had he been the tenderest of nurses, and well supplied the place of her whom they had lost. Neighbours would have helped him gladly—sometimes did; and many was the hinted offer (disinterested enough, too, for in that match penury must have been the settlement, and starvation the dower), of giving them a mother's kindly care; but Roger could not quite so soon forget the dead: so he would carry his darlings with him to his work, and feed them with his own hard hands; the farmers winked at it,

and never said a word against the tiny trespassers; their wives and daughters loved the little dears, bringing them milk and possets; and holy angels from on high may have oft-times hovered about this rude nurse, tending his soft innocents a-field, and have wept over the poor widower and his orphans, tears of happy sorrow and benevolent affection. Yea, many a good angel has shed blessings on their heads!

Within the last three years, and sixteen from the date of his first great grief, Roger had again got married. His daughter was growing [Pg 016]into early womanhood, and his son gave him trouble at times, and the cottage wanted a ruling hand over it when he was absent, and rheumatism now and then bade him look out for a nurse before old age, and Mary Alder was a notable middle-aged careful sort of soul, and so she became Mary Acton. All went on pretty well, until Mrs. Acton began to have certain little ones of her own; and then the step-mother would break out (a contingency poor Roger hadn't thought of), separate interests crept in, and her own children fared before the others; so it came to pass that, however truly there was a ruling hand at home, and however well the rheumatism got nursed (for Mary was a good wife in the main), the grown-up son and daughter felt themselves a little jostled out. Grace, gentle and submissive, found all her comforts shrunk within the space of her father and her Bible; Thomas, self-willed and open-hearted, sought his pleasure any where but at home, and was like to be taking to wrong courses through domestic bickering: Grace had the dangerous portion, beauty, added to her lowly lot, and attracted more admiration than her father wished, or she could understand; while the frank and bold spirit of Thomas Acton exposed him to the perilous friendship of Ben Burke the poacher, and divers other questionable characters.

Of these elements, then, are our labourer and his family composed; and before Roger Acton goes abroad at earliest streak of dawn, we will take a casual peep within his dwelling. It consists of four bare rubble walls, enclosing a grouted floor, worn unevenly, and here and there in holes, and puddly. There were but two rooms in the tenement, one on the ground, and one over-head; which latter is with no small difficulty got at by scaling a ladder-like stair-case that fronts the cottage-door. This upper chamber, the common dor-

mitory, for all but Thomas, who sleeps down stairs, has a thin partition at one end of it, to screen off the humble truckle-bed where Grace Acton forgets by night the troubles of the day; and the remainder of the little apartment, sordid enough, and overhung with the rough thatch, black with cobweb, serves for the father and mother with their recent nursery. Each room has its shattery casement, to let in through lincened panes, the doubtful light of summer, and the much more indubitable wind, and rain, and frost of wintry nights. A few articles of crockery and some burnished tins decorate the shelves of the lower apartment; which used to be much tidier before the children came, and trimmer still when Grace was sole manager: in a doorless cupboard are apparent sundry coarse edibles, as the half of a huge unshapely home-made loaf, some white country [Pg 017]cheese, a mass of lumpy pudding, and so forth; beside it, on the window-sill, is better bread, a well-thumbed Bible, some tracts, and a few odd volumes picked up cheap at fairs; an old musket (occasionally Ben's companion, sometimes Tom's) is hooked to the rafters near a double rope of onions; divers gaudy little prints, tempting spoil of pedlars, in honour of George Barnwell, the Prodigal Son, the Sailor's Return, and the Death of Nelson, decorate the walls, and an illuminated Christmas carol is pasted over the mantel-piece: which, among other chattels and possessions, conspicuously bears its own burden of Albert and Victoria—two plaster heads, resplendently coloured, highly varnished, looking with arched eye-brows of astonishment on their uninviting palace, and royally contrasting with the sombre hue of poverty on all things else. The pictures had belonged to Mary, no small portion of her virgin wealth; and as for the statuary, those two busts had cost loyal Roger far more in comparison than any corporation has given to P.R.A., for majesty and consortship in full. There is, moreover, in the room, by way of household furniture, a ricketty, triangular, and tri-legged table, a bench, two old chairs with rush-bottoms, and a yard or two of matting that the sexton gave when the chancel was new laid. I don't know that there is any thing else to mention, unless it be a gaunt lurcher belonging to Ben Burke, and with all a dog's resemblance to his master, who lies stretched before the hearth where the peaty embers never quite die out, but smoulder away to a heap of white ashes; over these is hanging a black boiler, the cook of the family; and beside them, on a substratum of dry heather, and

wrapped about with an old blanket, nearly companioned by his friend, the dog, snores Thomas Acton, still fast asleep, after his usual extemporaneous fashion.

As to the up-stairs apartment, it contained little or nothing but its living inmates, their bedsteads and tattered coverlids, and had an air of even more penury and discomfort than the room below; so that, what with squalling children, a scolding wife, and empty stomach, and that cold and wet March morning, it is little wonder maybe (though no small blame), that Roger Acton had not enough of religion or philosophy to rise and thank his Maker for the blessings of existence.

He had just been dreaming of great good luck. Poor people often do so; just as Ugolino dreamt of imperial feasts, and Bruce, in his delirious thirst on the Sahara, could not banish from his mind the cool fountains of Shiraz, and the luxurious waters of old Nile. Roger had unfortunately dreamt of having found a crock of gold—I dare say he will tell us his [Pg 018]dream anon—and just as he was counting out his treasure, that blessed beautiful heap of shining money—cruel habit roused him up before the dawn, and his wealth faded from his fancy. So he awoke at five, anything but cheerfully.

It was Grace's habit, good girl, to read to her father in the morning a few verses from the volume she best loved: she always woke betimes when she heard him getting up, and he could hear her easily from her little flock-bed behind the lath partition; and many a time had her dear religious tongue, uttering the words of peace, soothed her father's mind, and strengthened him to meet the day's affliction; many times it raised his thoughts from the heavy cares of life to the buoyant hopes of immortality. Hitherto, Roger had owed half his meek contentedness to those sweet lessons from a daughter's lips, and knew that he was reaping, as he heard, the harvest of his own paternal care, and heaven-blest instructions. However, upon this dark morning, he was full of other thoughts, murmurings, and doubts, and poverty, and riches. So, when Grace, after her usual affectionate salutations, gently began to read,

"The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory —"

Her father strangely stopped her on a sudden with—

"Enough, enough, my girl! God wot, the sufferings are grievous, and the glory long a-coming."

Then he heavily went down stairs, and left Grace crying.

CHAPTER III.

THE CONTRAST.

Thus, full of carking care, while he pushed aside the proffered consolation, Roger Acton walked abroad. There was yet but a glimmer of faint light, and the twittering of birds told more assuringly of morning than any cheerful symptom on the sky: however, it had pretty well ceased raining, that was one comfort, and, as Roger, shouldering his spade, and with the day's provision in a handkerchief, trudged out upon his daily duty, those good old thoughts of thankfulness came upon his mind, and he forgot awhile the dream that had unstrung him. Turning [Pg 019]for a moment to look upon his hovel, and bless its inmates with a prayer, he half resolved to run back, and hear a few more words, if only not to vex his darling child: but there was now no time to spare; and then, as he gazed upon her desolate abode—so foul a casket for so fair a jewel—his bitter thoughts returned to him again, and he strode away, repining.

Acton's cottage was one of those doubtful domiciles, whose only recommendation it is, that they are picturesque in summer. At present we behold a reeking rotting mass of black thatch in a cheerless swamp; but, as the year wears on, those time-stained walls, though still both damp and mouldy, will be luxuriantly overspread with creeping plants—honeysuckle, woodbine, jessamine, and the everblowing monthly rose. Many was the touring artist it had charmed, and Suffolk-street had seen it often: spectators looked upon the scene as on an old familiar friend, whose face they knew full well, but whose name they had forgotten for the minute. Many were the fair hands that had immortalized its beauties in their albums, and frequent the notes of admiration uttered by attending swains: particularly if there chanced to be taken into the view a feathery elm that now creaked overhead, and dripped on the thatch like the dropping-well at Knaresborough, and (in the near distance)

a large pond, or rather lake, upon whose sedgy banks, gay—not now, but soon about to be—with flowering reeds and bright green willows, the pretty cottage stood. In truth, if man were but an hibernating animal, invisible as dormice in the winter, and only to be seen with summer swallows, Acton's cottage at Hurstley might have been a cantle cut from the Elysian-fields. But there are certain other seasons in the year, and human nature cannot long exist on the merely "picturesque in summer."

Some fifty yards, or so, from the hither shore, we discern a roughly wooded ait, Pike Island to wit, a famous place for fish, and the grand rendezvous for woodcocks; which, among other useful and ornamental purposes, serves to screen out the labourer's hovel, at this the narrowest part of the lake, from a view of that fine old mansion on the opposite shore, the seat of Sir John Vincent, a baronet just of age, and the great landlord of the neighbourhood. Toward this mansion, scarcely yet revealed in the clear gray eye of morning, our humble hero, having made the long round of the lake, is now fast trudging; and it may merit a word or two of plain description, to fill up time and scene, till he gets nearer.

A smooth grassy eminence, richly studded with park-like clumps of trees, slopes up from the water's very edge to—Hurstley Hall; yonder [Pg 020]goodly, if not grand, Elizabethan structure, full of mullioned windows, carved oak panels, stone-cut coats of arms, pinnacles, and traceries, and lozenges, and drops; and all this glory crowned by a many-gabled, high-peaked roof. A grove of evergreens and American shrubs hides the lower windows from vulgarian gaze—for, in the neighbourly feeling of our ancestors, a public way leads close along the front; while, behind the house, and inaccessible to eyes profane, are drawn terraced gardens, beautifully kept, and blooming with a perpetual succession of the choicest flowers. The woods and shrubberies around, attempted some half a century back to be spoilt by the meddlesome bad taste of Capability Brown, have been somewhat too resolutely robbed of the formal avenues, clipped hedges, and other topiarian adjuncts which comport so well with the starch prudery of things Elizabethan; but they are still replete with grotto, fountain, labyrinth, and alcove—a very paradise for the more court-bred rank of sylphs, and the gentler elves of Queen Titania.

However, we have less to do with the gardens than, probably, the elves have; and as Roger now, just at breaking day, is approaching the windows somewhat too curiously for a poor man's manners, it may not be amiss if we bear him company. He had pretty well recovered of his fit of discontent, for morning air and exercise can soon chase gloom away; so he cheerily tramped along, thinking as he went, how that, after all, it is a middling happy world, and how that the raindrops, now that it had cleared up, hung like diamonds on the laurels, when of a sudden, as he turned a corner near the house, there broke upon his ear, at that quiet hour, such a storm of boisterous sounds—voices so loud with oaths and altercation—such a calling, clattering, and quarrelling, as he had never heard the like before. So no wonder that he stepped aside to see it.

The noise proceeded from a ground-floor window, or rather from three windows, lighted up, and hung with draperies of crimson and gold: one of the casements, flaring meretriciously in the modest eye of morn, stood wide open down to the floor, probably to cool a heated atmosphere; and when Roger Acton, with a natural curiosity, went on tiptoe, looked in, and just put aside the curtain for a peep, to know what on earth could be the matter, he saw a vision of waste and wealth, at which he stood like one amazed, for a poor man's mind could never have conceived its equal.

Evidently, he had intruded on the latter end of a long and luxurious revel. Wax-lights, guttering down in gilded chandeliers, poured their [Pg 021]mellow radiance round in multiplied profusion—for mirrors made them infinite; crimson and gold were the rich prevailing tints in that wide and warm banqueting-room; gayly-coloured pictures, set in frames that Roger fancied massive gold, hung upon the walls at intervals; a wagon-load of silver was piled upon the sideboard; there blazed in the burnished grate such a fire as poverty might imagine on a frozen winter's night, but never can have thawed its blood beside: fruits, and wines, and costly glass were scattered in prodigal disorder on the board—just now deserted of its noisy guests, who had crowded round a certain green table, where cards and heaps of sovereigns appeared to be mingled in a mass. Roger had never so much as conceived it possible that there could be wealth like this: it was a fairy-land of Mammon in his eyes: he stood gasping like a man enchanted; and in the contemplation of

these little hills of gold—in their covetous longing contemplation, he forgot the noisy quarrel he had turned aside to see, and thirsted for that rich store earnestly.

In an instant, as he looked (after the comparative lull that must obviously have succeeded to the clamours he had first heard), the roar and riot broke out worse than ever. There were the stormy revellers, as the rabble rout of Comus and his crew, filling that luxurious room with the sounds of noisy execration and half-drunken strife. Young Sir John, a free and generous fellow, by far the best among them all, has collected about him those whom he thought friends, to celebrate his wished majority; they had now kept it up, night after night, hard upon a week; and, as well became such friends—the gambler, the duellist, the man of pleasure, and the fool of Fashion—they never yet had separated for their day-light beds, without a climax to their orgie, something like the present scene.

Henry Mynton, high in oath, and dashing down his cards, has charged Sir Richard Hunt with cheating (it was *sauter la coupe* or *couper la saut*, or some such mystery of iniquity, I really cannot tell which): Sir Richard, a stout dark man, the patriarch of the party, glossily wigged upon his head, and imperially tufted on his chin, retorts with a pungent sarcasm, calmly and coolly uttered; that hot-headed fool Silliphant, clearly quite intoxicated, backs his cousin Mynton's view of the case by the cogent argument of a dice-box at Sir Richard's head—and at once all is struggle, strife, and uproar. The other guests, young fellows of high fashion, now too much warmed with wine to remember their accustomed Mohican cold-bloodedness—those happy debtors to the prowess of a Stultz, and walking advertisers of Nugee—take eager part with the [Pg 022]opposed belligerents: more than one decanter is sent hissing through the air; more than one bloody coxcomb witnesses to the weight of a candle-stick and its hurler's clever aim: uplifted chairs are made the weapons of the chivalric combatants; and along with divers other less distinguished victims in the *melée*, poor Sir John Vincent, rushing into the midst, as a well-intentioned host, to quell the drunken brawl, gets knocked down among them all; the tables are upset, the bright gold runs about the room in all directions—ha! no one heeds it—no one owns it—one little piece rolled right up to the window-sill where Roger still looked on with all his eyes; it is

but to put his hand in—the window is open to the floor—nay a finger is enough: greedily, one undecided moment, did he gaze upon the gold; he saw the hideous contrast of his own dim hovel and that radiant chamber—he remembered the pining faces of his babes, and gentle Grace with all her hardships—he thought upon his poverty and well deserts—he looked upon wastefulness of wealth and wantonness of living—these reflections struck him in a moment; no one saw him, no one cared about the gold; that little blessed morsel, that could do him so much good; all was confusion, all was opportunity, and who can wonder that his fingers closed upon the sovereign, and that he picked it up?

CHAPTER IV.

THE LOST THEFT.

Stealthily and quickly "honest Roger" crept away, for his conscience smote him on the instant: he felt he had done wrong; at any rate, the sovereign was not his—and once the thought arose in him to run back, and put it where he found it: but it was now become too precious in his sight, that little bit of gold—and they, the rioters there, could not want it, might not even miss it; and then its righteous uses—it should be well spent, even if ill-got: and thus, so many mitigations crowded in to excuse, if not to applaud the action, that within a little while his warped mind had come to call the theft a god-send.

O Roger, Roger! alas for this false thought of that wrong deed! the poisonous gold has touched thy heart, and left on it a spot of cancer: the asp has bitten thee already, simple soul. This little seed will grow into [Pg 023]a huge black pine, that shall darken for a while thy heaven, and dig its evil roots around thy happiness. Put it away, Roger, put it away: covet not unhallowed gold.

But Roger felt far otherwise; and this sudden qualm of conscience once quelled (I will say there seemed much of palliation in the matter), a kind of inebriate feeling of delight filled his mind, and Steady Acton plodded on to the meadow yonder, half a mile a-head, in a species of delirious complacency. Here was luck indeed, filling up