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Chapter 1.

A large party were assembled in the drawing room of Greendale, Sir John Greendale's picturesque old mansion house. It was early in September. The men had returned from shooting, and the guests were gathered in the drawing room; in the pleasant half hour of dusk when the lamps have not yet been lighted, though it is already too dark to read. The conversation was general, and from the latest news from India had drifted into the subject of the Italian belief in the Mal Occhio.

"Do you believe in it, Captain Mallett?" asked Bertha, Sir John's only child, a girl of sixteen; who was nestled in an easy chair next to that in which the man she addressed was sitting.

"I don't know, Bertha."

He had known her from childhood, and she had not yet reached an age when the formal "Miss Greendale" was incumbent upon her acquaintances.

"I do not believe in the Italian superstition to anything like the extent they carry it. I don't think I should believe it at all if it were not that one man has always been unlucky to me."

"How unlucky, Captain Mallett?"

"Well, I don't know that unlucky is the proper word, but he has always stood between me and success; at least, he always did, for it is some years since our paths have crossed."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, I have no objection, but there is not a great deal to tell.

"I was at school with—I won't mention his name. We were about the same age. He was a bully. I interfered with him, we had a fight, and I scored my first and only success over him. It was a very tough fight—by far the toughest I ever had. I was stronger than he, but he was the more active. I fancied that it would not be very difficult to thrash him, but found that I had made a great mistake. It was a long fight, and it was only because I was in better condition that I won at last.

"Well, you know when boys fight at school, in most cases they become better friends afterwards; but it was not so here. He refused to shake hands with me, and muttered something about its being his turn next time. Till then he had not been considered a first-rate hand at anything; he was one of those fellows who saunter through school, get up just enough lessons to rub along comfortably, never take any prominent part in games, but have a little set of their own, and hold themselves aloof from school in general.

"Once or twice when we had played cricket he had done so excellently that it was a grievance that he would not play regularly, and there was a sort of general idea that if he chose he could do most things well. After that fight he changed altogether. He took to cricket in downright earnest, and was soon acknowledged to be the best bat and best bowler in the school. Before that it had been regarded as certain that when the captain left I should be elected, but when the time came he got a majority of votes. I should not have minded that, for I recognised that he was a better player than I, but I fancied that he had not done it fairly, for many fellows whom I regarded as certain to support me turned round at the last moment.

"We were in the same form at school. He had been always near the bottom; I stood fairly up in it, and was generally second or third. He took to reading, and in six weeks after the fight won his way to the top of the class and remained there; and not only so, but he soon showed himself so far superior to the rest of us that he got his remove to the form above.

"Then there was a competition in Latin verses open to both forms. Latin verse was the one thing in which I was strong. There is a sort of knack, you know, in stringing them together. A fellow may be a duffer generally and yet turn out Latin verse better than fellows who are vastly superior to him on other points. It was regarded as certain that I should gain that. No one had intended to go in against me, but at the last moment he put his name down, and, to the astonishment of everyone, won in a canter.

"We left about the same time, and went up to Oxford together, but to different Colleges. I rowed in my College Eight, he in his. We were above them on the river, but they made a bump every night until they got behind us, and then bumped us. He was stroke of his

boat, and everyone said that success was due to his rowing, and I believe it was. I did not so much mind that, for my line was chiefly sculling. I had won in my own College, and entered for Henley, where it was generally thought that I had a fair chance of winning the Diamonds. However, I heard a fortnight before the entries closed that he was out on the river every morning sculling. I knew what it was going to be, and was not surprised when his name appeared next to mine in the entries.

"We were drawn together, and he romped in six lengths ahead of me, though curiously enough he was badly beaten in the final heat. He stroked the University afterwards. Though I was tried I did not even get a seat in the eight, contrary to general expectation, but I know that it was his influence that kept me out of it.

"We had only one more tussle, and again I was worsted. I went in for the Newdigate--that is the English poetry prize, you know. I had always been fond of stringing verses together, and the friends to whom I showed my poem before sending it in all thought that I had a very good chance. I felt hopeful myself, for I had not heard that he was thinking of competing, and, indeed, did not remember that he had ever written a line of verse when at school. However, when the winner was declared, there was his name again.

"I believe that it was the disgust I felt at his superiority to me in everything that led me to ask my father to get me a commission at once, for it seemed to me that I should never succeed in anything if he were my rival. Since then our lives have been altogether apart, although I have met him occasionally. Of course we speak, for there has never been any quarrel between us since that fight, but I know that he has never forgiven me, and I have a sort of uneasy conviction that some day or other we shall come into contact again.

"I am sure that if we meet again he will do me a bad turn if possible. I regard him as being in some sort of way my evil genius. I own that it is foolish and absurd, but I cannot get over the feeling."

"Oh, it is absurd, Captain Mallett," the girl said. "He may have beaten you in little things, but you won the Victoria Cross in the Crimea, and everyone knows that you are one of the best shots in the country, and that before you went away you were always in the first flight with the hounds."

"Ah, you are an enthusiast, Bertha. I don't say that I cannot hold my own with most men at a good many things where not brains, but brute strength and a quick eye are the only requisites, but I am quite convinced that if that fellow had been in the Redan that day, he would have got the Victoria Cross, and I should not. There is no doubt about his pluck, and if it had only been to put me in the shade he would have performed some brilliant action or other that would have got it for him. He is a better rider than I am, at any rate a more reckless one, and he is a better shot, too. He is incomparably more clever."

"I cannot believe it, Captain Mallett."

"It is quite true, Bertha, and to add to it all, he is a remarkably handsome fellow, a first-rate talker, and when he pleases can make himself wonderfully popular."

"He must be a perfect Crichton, Captain Mallett."

"The worst of it is, Bertha, although I am ashamed of myself for thinking so, I have never been able to divest myself of the idea that he did not play fair. There were two or three queer things that happened at school in which he was always suspected of having had a hand, though it was never proved. I was always convinced that he used cribs, and partly owed his place to them. I was jealous enough to believe that the Latin verses he sent in were written for him by Rigby, who was one of the monitors, and a great dab at verses. Rigby was a great chum of his, for he was a mean fellow, and my rival was always well supplied with money, and to do him justice, liberal with it.

"Then, just before we left school, he carried off the prize in swimming. He was a good swimmer, but I was a better. I thought myself for once certain to beat him, but an hour before the race I got frightful cramps, a thing that I never had before or since, and I could hardly make a fight at all. I thought at the time, and I have thought since, that I must have taken something at breakfast that disagreed with me horribly, and that he somehow put it in my tea.

"Then again in that matter of the Sculls at Henley. I never felt my boat row so heavily as it did then. When it was taken out of the water it was found that a piece of curved iron hoop was fixed to the

bottom by a nail that had been pushed through the thin skin. It certainly was not there when it was on the rack, but it was there when I rowed back to the boathouse, and it could only have got there by being put on as the boat was being lowered into the water. There were three or four men helping to lower her down—two of them friends of mine, two of them fellows employed at the boathouse. While it lay in the water, before I got in and took my place, anyone stooping over it might unobserved have passed his hand under it and have pushed the nail through.

"I never said anything about it. I had been beaten; there was no use making a row and a scandal over it, especially as I had not a shadow of proof against anyone; but I was certain that he was not so fast as I was, for during practice my time had been as nearly as possible the same as that of the man who beat him with the greatest ease, and I am convinced that for once I should have got the better of him had it not been for foul play."

"That was shameful, Captain Mallett," Bertha said, indignantly. "I wonder you did not take some steps to expose him."

"I had nothing to go upon, Bertha. It was a case of suspicion only, and you have no idea what a horrible row there would have been if I had said anything about it. Committees would have sat upon it, and the thing would have got into the papers. Fellows would have taken sides, and I should have been blackguarded by one party for hinting that a well-known University man had been guilty of foul practices.

"Altogether it would have been a horrible nuisance; it was much better to keep quiet and say nothing about it."

"I am sure I could not have done that, Captain."

"No, but then you see women are much more impetuous than men. I am certain that after you had once set the ball rolling, you would have been sorry that you had not bided your time and waited for another contest in which you might have turned the tables fairly and squarely."

"He must be hateful," the girl said.

"He is not considered hateful, I can assure you. He conceived a grudge against me, and has taken immense pains to pay me out, and I only trust that our paths will never cross again. If so, I have no doubt that I shall again get the worst of it. At any rate, you see I was not without justification when I said that though I did not believe in the Mal Occhio, I had reason for having some little superstition about it."

"I prophesy, Captain Mallett, that if ever you meet him in the future you will turn the tables on him. Such a man as that can never win in the long run."

"Well, I hope that your prophecy will come true. At any rate I shall try, and I hope that your good wishes will counterbalance his power, and that you will be a sort of Mascotte."

"How tiresome!" the girl broke off, as there was a movement among the ladies. "It is time for us to go up to dress for dinner, and though I shan't take half the time that some of them will do, I suppose I must go."

Captain Mallett had six months previously succeeded, at the death of his father, to an estate five miles from that of Sir John Greendale. His elder brother had been killed in the hunting field a few months before, and Frank Mallett, who was fond of his profession, and had never looked for anything beyond it save a younger son's portion, had thus come in for a very fine estate.

Two months after his father's death he most reluctantly sent in his papers, considering it his duty to settle down on the estate; but ten days later came the news of the outbreak of the Sepoys of Barrack-poor, and he at once telegraphed to the War Office, asking to be allowed to cancel his application for leave to sell out.

So far the cloud was a very small one, but rumours of trouble had been current for some little time, and the affair at least gave him an excuse for delaying his retirement.

Very rapidly the little cloud spread until it overshadowed India from Calcutta to the Afghan frontier. His regiment stood some distance down on the rota for Indian service, but as the news grew worse regiment after regiment was hurried off, and it now stood very near the head of the list. All leave had not yet been stopped,

but officers away were ordered to leave addresses, so that they could be summoned to join at an hour's notice.

When he had left home that morning for a day's shooting with Sir John, he had ordered a horse to be kept saddled, so that if a telegram came it could be brought to him without a moment's delay. He was burning to be off. There had at first been keen disappointment in the regiment that they were not likely to take part in the fierce struggle; but the feeling had changed into one of eager expectation, when, as the contest widened and it was evident that it would be necessary to make the greatest efforts to save India, the prospect of their employment in the work grew.

For the last fortnight expectation had been at its height. Orders had been received for the regiment to hold itself in readiness for embarkation, men had been called back from furlough, the heavy baggage had been packed; and all was ready for a start at twenty-four hours' notice. Many of the officers obtained a few days' leave to say goodbye to their friends or settle business matters, and Frank Mallett was among them.

"So I suppose you may go at any moment, Mallett?" said the host at the dinner table that evening.

"Yes, Sir John, my shooting today has been execrable; for I have known that at any moment my fellow might ride up with the order for me to return at once, and we are all in such a fever of impatience, that I am surprised I brought down a bird at all."

"You can hardly hope to be in time either for the siege of Delhi or for the relief of Lucknow, Mallett."

"One would think not, but there is no saying. You see, our news is a month old; Havelock had been obliged to fall back on Cawnpore, and a perfect army of rebels were in Delhi. Of course, the reinforcements will soon be arriving, and I don't think it likely that we shall get up there in time to share in those affairs; but even if we are late both for Lucknow and Delhi, there will be plenty for us to do. What with the Sepoy army and with the native chiefs that have joined them, and the fighting men of Oude and one thing and another, there cannot be less than 200,000 men in arms against us; and even if we do take Delhi and relieve Lucknow, that is only the be-

ginning of the work. The scoundrels are fighting with halters round their necks, and I have no fear of our missing our share of the work of winning back India and punishing these bloodthirsty scoundrels."

"It is a terrible time," Sir John said; "and old as I am, I should like to be out there to lend a hand in avenging this awful business at Cawnpore, and the cold-blooded massacres at other places."

"I think that there will be no lack of volunteers, Sir John. If Government were to call for them I believe that 100,000 men could be raised in a week."

"Ay, in twenty-four hours; there is scarce a man in England but would give five years of his life to take a share in the punishment of the faithless monsters. There was no lack of national feeling in the Crimean War; but it was as nothing to that which has been excited by these massacres. Had it been a simple mutiny among the troops we should all be well content to leave the matter in the hands of our soldiers; but it is a personal matter to everyone; rich and poor are alike moved by a burning desire to take part in the work of vengeance. I should doubt if the country has ever been so stirred from its earliest history."

"Yes, I fancy we are all envying you, Mallett," one of the other gentlemen said. "Partridge shooting is tame work in comparison with that which is going on in India. It was lucky for you that that first mutiny took place when it did, for had it been a week later you would probably have been gazetted out before the news came."

"Yes, that was a piece of luck, certainly, Ashurst. I don't know how I should be feeling if I had been out of it and the regiment on the point of starting for India."

"I suppose you are likely to embark from Plymouth," said Sir John.

"I should think so, but there is no saying. I hardly fancy that we should go through France, as some of the regiments have done; there would be no very great gain of time, especially if we start as far west as Plymouth. Besides, I have not heard of any transports being sent round to Marseilles lately. Of course, in any case we shall have to land at Alexandria and cross the desert to Suez. I should

fancy, now that the advantages of that route have been shown, that troops in future will always be taken that way. You see, it is only five weeks to India instead of five months. The situation is bad enough as it is, but it would have been infinitely worse if no reinforcements could have got out from England in less than five months."

"Is there anything that I can do for you while you are away, Mallett?" Sir John Greendale asked, as they lingered for a moment after the other gentlemen had gone off to join the ladies.

"Nothing that I know of, thank you. Norton will see that everything goes on as usual. My father never interfered with him in the general management of the estate, and had the greatest confidence in him. I have known him since I was a child, and have always liked him, so I can go away assured that things will go on as usual. If I go down, the estate goes, as you know, to a distant cousin whom I have never seen.

"As to other matters, I have but little to arrange. I have made a will, so that I shall have nothing to trouble me on that score. Tranton came over with it this morning from Stroud, and I signed it."

"That is right, lad; we all hope most sincerely that there will be no occasion for its provisions to be carried out, but it is always best that a man should get these things off his mind. Are you going to say goodbye to us tonight?"

"I shall do it as a precautionary measure, Sir John, but I expect that when I get the summons I shall have time to drive over here. My horse will do the distance in five and twenty minutes, and unless a telegram comes within an hour of the night mail passing through Stroud, I shall be able to manage it. I saw everything packed up before I left, and my man will see that everything, except the portmanteau with the things I shall want on the voyage, goes on with the regimental baggage."

A quarter of an hour later Captain Mallett mounted his dog cart and drove home. The next morning he received a letter from the Adjutant, saying that he expected the order some time during the next day.

"We are to embark at Plymouth, and I had a telegram this morning saying that the transport had arrived and had taken her coal on board. Of course they will get the news at the War Office today, and will probably wire at once. I think we shall most likely leave here by a train early the next morning. I shall, of course, telegraph as soon as the order comes, but as I know that you have everything ready, you will be in plenty of time if you come on by the night mail."

At eleven o'clock a mounted messenger from Stroud brought on the telegram:

"We entrain at six tomorrow morning. Join immediately."

This was but a formal notification, and he resolved to go on by the night mail. He spent the day in driving round the estate and saying goodbye to his tenants. He lunched at the house of one of the leading farmers, where as a boy he had been always made heartily welcome. Before mounting his dog cart, he stood for a few minutes chatting with Martha, his host's pretty daughter.

"You are not looking yourself, Martha," he said. "You must pick up your roses again before I come back. I shall leave the army then, and give a big dinner to my tenants, with a dance afterwards, and I shall open the ball with you, and expect you to look your best."

"Who is this?" he asked, as a young fellow came round the corner of the house, and on seeing them, turned abruptly, and walked off.

"It is George Lechmere, is it not?"

A flash of colour came into the girl's face.

"Ah, I see," he laughed; "he thought I was flirting with you, and has gone off jealous. Well, you will have no difficulty in making your peace with him tomorrow."

"Goodbye, child, I must be going. I have a long round to make."

He jumped into the dog cart and drove away, while the girl went quietly back into the house.

Her father looked up at the clock.

"Two o'clock," he said; "I must be going. I expected George Lechmere over here. He was coming to talk with me about his father's twelve-acre meadow. I want it badly this winter, for I have

had more land under the plough than usual this year. I must either get some pasture or sell off some of my stock."

"George Lechmere came, father," Martha said, with an angry toss of her head, "but when he saw me talking to Captain Mallett he turned and went off; just as if I was not to open my lips to any man but himself."

The farmer would have spoken, but his wife shook her head at him. George Lechmere had been at one time engaged to Martha, but his jealousy had caused so many quarrels that the engagement had been broken off. He still came often to the house, however, and her parents hoped that it would be renewed; for the young fellow's character stood high. He was his father's right hand, and would naturally succeed him to the farm. His parents, too, had heartily approved of the match. So far, however, the prospect of the young people coming together was not encouraging. Martha was somewhat given to flirtation. George was as jealous as ever, and was unable to conceal his feelings, which, as he had now no right to criticise her conduct, so angered the girl that she not unfrequently gave encouragement to others solely to show her indifference to his opinions.

George Lechmere had indeed gone away with anger in his heart. He knew that Captain Mallett was on the point of leaving with his regiment for India, and yet to see him chatting familiarly with Martha excited in him a passionate feeling of grievance against her.

"It matters nought who it is," he muttered to himself. "She is ever ready to carry on with anyone, while she can hardly give me a civil word when I call. I know that if we were to marry it would be just the same thing, and that I am a fool to stop here and let it vex me. It would be better for me to get right out of it. John is old enough to take my place on the farm. Some of these days I will take the Queen's shilling. If I were once away I should not be always thinking of her. I know I am a fool to let a girl trouble me so, but I can't help it. If I stay here I know that I shall do mischief either to her or to someone else. I felt like doing it last month when she was over at that business at Squire Carthew's—he is just such another one as Captain Mallett, only he is a bad landlord, while ours is a good one. What made him think of asking all his own tenantry, and a good

many of us round, and getting up a cricket match and a dance on the grass is more than I can say. He never did such a thing before in all the ten years since he became master there. They all noticed how he carried on with Martha, and how she seemed to like it. It was the talk of everyone there. If I had not gone away I should have made a fool of myself, though I have no right to interfere with her, and her father and mother were there and seemed in no way put out.

"I will go away and have a look at that lot of young cattle I bought the other day. I don't know that I ever saw a more likely lot."

It was dark when George returned. On his way home he took a path that passed near the house whence he had turned away so angrily a few hours before. It was not the nearest way, but somehow he always took it, even at hours when there was no chance of his getting the most distant sight of Martha.

Presently he stopped suddenly, for from behind the wall that bounded the kitchen garden of the farm he heard voices. A man was speaking.

"You must make your choice at once, darling, for as I have told you I am off tomorrow. We will be married as soon as we get there, and you know you cannot stop here."

"I know I can't," Martha's voice replied, "but how can I leave?"

"They will forgive you when you come back a lady," he said. "It will be a year at least before I return, and—"

George could restrain himself no longer. A furious exclamation broke from his lips, and he made a desperate attempt to climb the wall, which was, however, too high. When, after two or three unsuccessful attempts, he paused for a moment, all was silent in the garden.

"I will tackle her tomorrow," he said grimly, "and him, too. But I dare not go in now. Bennett has always been a good friend to me, and so has his wife, and it would half kill them were they to know what I have heard; but as for her and that villain—"

George's mouth closed in grim determination, and he strolled on home through the darkness. Whatever his resolutions may have been, he found no opportunity of carrying them out, for the next

morning he heard that Martha Bennett had disappeared. How or why, no one knew. She had been missing since tea time on the previous afternoon. She had taken nothing with her, and the farmer and his two sons were searching all the neighbourhood for some sign of her.

The police of Stroud came over in the afternoon, and took up the investigation. The general opinion was that she must have been murdered, and every pond was dragged, every ditch examined, for a distance round the farm. In the meantime George Lechmere held his tongue.

"It is better," he said to himself, "that her parents and friends should think her dead than know the truth."

He seldom spoke to anyone, but went doggedly about his work. His father and mother, knowing how passionately he had been attached to Martha, were not surprised at his strange demeanour, though they wondered that he took no part in the search for her.

They had their trouble, too, for although they never breathed a word of their thoughts even to each other, there was, deep down in their hearts, a fear that George knew something of the girl's disappearance. His intense jealousy had been a source of grief and trouble to them. Previous to his engagement to Martha he had been everything they could have wished him. He had been the best of sons, the steadiest of workers, and a general favourite from his willingness to oblige, his cheerfulness and good temper.

His jealousy, as a child, had been a source of trouble. Any gift, any little treat, for his younger brothers, in which he had not fully shared, had been the occasion for a violent outburst of temper, never exhibited by him at any other time, and this feeling had again shown itself as soon as he had singled out Martha as the object of his attentions.

They had remarked a strangeness in his manner when he had returned home that night, and, remembering the past, each entertained a secret dread that there had been some more violent quarrel than usual between him and Martha, and that in his mad passion he had killed her.

It was, then, with a feeling almost of relief that a month after her disappearance he briefly announced his intention of leaving the farm and enlisting in the army. His mother looked in dumb misery at her husband, who only said gravely:

"Well, lad, you are old enough to make your own choice. Things have changed for you of late, and maybe it is as well that you should make a change, too. You have been a good son, and I shall miss you sorely; but John is taking after you, and presently he will make up for your loss."

"I am sorry to go, father, but I feel that I cannot stay here."

"If you feel that it is best that you should go, George, I shall say no word to hinder you," and then his wife was sure that the fear she felt was shared by her husband.

The next morning George came down in his Sunday clothes, carrying a bundle. Few words were spoken at breakfast; when it was over he got up and said:

"Well, goodbye, father and mother, and you boys. I never thought to leave you like this, but things have gone against me, and I feel I shall be best away.

"John, I look to you to fill my place.

"Good-bye all," and with a silent shake of the hand he took up his bundle and stick and went out, leaving his brothers, who had not been told of his intentions, speechless with astonishment.