

Colin II: A Novel

E. F. Benson

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PREFACE

THE Preface to "Colin" (published in 1923) informed such readers as peruse prefaces that a further volume would complete the history of his association with the bargain his ancestor struck with Satan.... "Colin II." therefore must not be regarded as a sequel to "Colin," but as the second half of that romance.

The interval between the appearance of the two books has been longer than I anticipated, for I was not aware of the difficulties that lay ahead.

E. F. BENSON.

INTRODUCTION

WITH the declining wheel of the sun to the west, the shadow of the great yew-hedge began to flow like some tide, dark and clear, over the paved terrace which since morning had basked in the blaze of the July day. It had been planted by Colin Stanier first Earl of Yardley, when he laid the foundations of his house in the time of Elizabeth, and the three-sided serge rampart, now thick and solid as a fortress-wall, ran out from the corners of the façade, and formed a frame for the lawn below the terrace. Beyond, the ground declined in smooth slopes of short-cut turf to the lake. This lake also was the creation of the first Lord Yardley, for he had built the broad dam now clothed with rhododendrons across the dip of the valley, so that the stream which flowed down it was pent to form this triangular expanse of water. At the top end it was shallow, but by the sluice in the centre of the dam fifteen feet of dark water reflected the banks of blossom.

Beyond again and below the hill-side tumbled rapidly down to the heat-hazed levels of the Romney marsh, and over all the great house kept watch, stately and steadfast as the hill from which it sprang, a presiding presence and symbol of the three centuries of unbroken prosperity which had blessed the fortunes of the Staniers. Whatever uprooting tornado of revolution had swept across England, devastating or impoverishing the great families of the past, they seemed anchored and protected beyond all power of ruinous vicissitudes. They were no fat or brainless race, who but batted and dozed in material magnificence, but served their country well in public ministries. As for their private lives, the Staniers have always considered that such were their own concern.

The family rose to the splendour which it still enjoys in the reign of Elizabeth. Its founder was one Colin Stanier, the son of a small local farmer, who, on the occasion of the Queen's visit to Rye as she toured her Cinque Ports, went into the town to see the pageant pass. As Her Grace rode down the steep cobbled way from the church, her horse stumbled, and the boy, some eighteen years old at the time, had the privilege by his quickness to save the Queen from a serious fall. She looked on his amazing comeliness with an admiring eye, and bade him wait on her next day at the Manor of Brede.... That night, according to the family tradition, as he worked and slept in a shepherd's hut on the marsh, busy with the midwifery of his father's ewes at lambing-time, he was visited by a personage even greater than the Queen, one no less than Satan himself, who, for the signing away of his soul, offered, not only to him but to those of his descendants who chose to associate themselves with the bargain, health and wealth and honour up to the fulness of their hearts' desire. A deed was thereupon executed between the two which Colin signed with the blood of his pricked arm and which is supposed still to exist, let into the frame of the famous portrait of him at the family seat of Stanier. This curious story has been known from that day to this as the Stanier Legend.

The advent of Colin's good fortune made no long tarrying, for early next morning, after his interview with His Satanic Majesty, he waited on Her Susceptible Majesty at the place appointed. Ruddy and fair he was to look upon, and even as the Lord took David, as he followed the ewes great with young, and made him King in Israel, so from the sheepfolds did Elizabeth take Colin Stanier and made him her page, and presently her most confidential secretary, and conferred on him at the age of twenty-five the monastic lands of Tillingham with the Earldom of Yardley and the Knighthood of the Garter. So, whether the student can

accept or not as true the Stanier Legend, he is forced to credit Colin's rise of fortune which is hardly less miraculous, for certainly he was a shepherd-boy one day, and a page of the Queen the next, and thereafter, while still a young man, attained a position such as few subjects have ever enjoyed. He wrote a voluminous memoir of his life which is preserved in the library at Stanier, and, yet unpublished, contains some very curious matter. In it he recorded without reticence or shame the manner of his days, his ruthless cruelty and relentlessness to those who crossed him, his building of the great house at Stanier, his ceaseless quest for pictures and tapestries, for statues and furniture, and described with the faithfulness of detail the bargain that he struck with Satan, and his conviction that he owed to it all the good fortune and prosperity that so unfailingly attended his earthly pilgrimage. That belief was confirmed by the characters of his descendants who by his bargain came under the diabolical protection, for in all history you will not find a family so consistently prosperous nor one so infamous. For more than a century after his death, the eldest son of the house made, on his twenty-first birthday, his formal choice as to whether he accepted for himself the legendary bargain, or dissociated himself from it, and during that period one only, Philip, the third Earl, would have no part in it, and he, within a month of his accession to his lordship, was smitten with a mysterious and terrible disease of which he soon died.

The rest all claimed their inheritance and mightily prospered, but in the eighteenth century their belief in so extravagant a legend faded in the light of more modern materialism. The solemn ritual of choice was performed no more, but, though the formality was given up, the subsequent successors to the bargain mostly acted up to the spirit of it, and their lives, if not their lips, acknowledged it. For, in general, their wickednesses have been as notable as

their prosperity; pity, and its greater kinsman, love, can find no seed-cranny in their hearts where they can take root, but both alike wither in that iron soil. The Staniers have always been loveless folk, and it is strange that, though love is alien to their natures, they have often so madly inspired it, and with a glance have kindled in others the fire which is powerless to warm them. They sate their passions, and, when that is done, toss the outworn minister away, or, if that minister is wife and mother to their children, she freezes in the Arctic cold of lovelessness. Many a bride has come to Stanier all ardent and a-flame, on whom that congealing blight has fallen, which has turned her into a figure of ice doing the honours of the house with stately courtesy, wearing the great jewels which are the insignia of her servitude, and bearing beautiful sons for the perpetuation of the race. The love that adorned her advent was frozen, maybe, into hate and horror of him with whom she was indissolubly one, and whose soul was in pawn to Satan.

The Staniers have never run to large families: two or at the most three children have been born to the Lord Yardley of the day. In the last generation there were three: Philip the eldest, a daughter Hester, and Ronald, father of Violet Stanier, now Countess of Yardley. At the time of her birth Philip, who had quarrelled with his intolerable sire, and was still unmarried, was living at a villa he had bought on the island of Capri with an Italian girl whom he had made his mistress. She was with child by him, and less than a month before her delivery news came to Philip, that this younger brother of his had begotten a daughter. He thereupon married Rosina Biagi, who soon presented him with twin boys. Philip telegraphed the news of his marriage and their birth to his father, and the despatch arrived as he and Ronald, heavy drinkers both of them, sat tipsily over their wine. Lord Yardley had had a stroke some two years

before, and now he fell forward with a crash among the glasses and died without speech. Within a few weeks Philip's wife died also, and he came home with his two sons to enter on his inheritance.

Of these the elder by half an hour was Raymond, a dark and ugly fellow, black of temper, and between him and his brother Colin, as they grew up, flowered an implacable enmity. On Colin the gods had lavished the utmost of their gifts; he was the beloved of his father and of all who came near him, and Raymond, the uncouth and unpleasing, envied and detested him. This hatred was hotly returned by the other. Raymond was an abomination in Colin's eyes, not only for what he was but because, thanks to that half-hour's seniority, he was heir to all that he himself so passionately coveted, title and revenues and, not least, the lordship of the wonder-house at Stanier. Through all their generations the Staniers have adored the place: it is said that none of them is completely happy if he is away from it for long. That passion was shared by Violet, who was an exact contemporary of her twin-cousins, and was brought up with them there, and it was for the sake of being its mistress that, at the age of twenty, she promised to marry Raymond. But her heart was already not her own to give, and, though as yet she scarcely knew it, Colin held it.

Then he beckoned to her, and, discarding the graceless Raymond, she married him, and forthwith, as if a lamp had suddenly been lit which showed her his black heart, she knew that, in loving him, she loved one in whom the Stanier Legend found such fulfilment as none of its inheritors had manifested yet. In person he might have been the very incarnation of their Elizabethan ancestor, who had founded the house, for there in life was the matchless beauty of the great portrait, the gold hair, the beautiful mouth, the dancing azure of the eyes in which gleamed the greeting of his enchanting grace; in him blossomed the

fairest that Nature and inheritance could bestow. Luck favoured him, even as it had favoured his ancestor, in all he did, for shortly after his marriage Raymond was miserably doomed as he skated on the lake at Christmas-time, and within a few months his father died also, and Colin his son reigned in his stead. He and Violet, fair as a spring day, numbered but forty years between them; they were an April couple with all the splendour of the summer waiting for them.

But the dawn of love for Violet had been the dawn, too of a nightmare of unfathomable darkness. For Colin, excelling all of his race who had been merely indifferent to love, knew very well what love meant, and bitterly hated it. He was not content to shrug his shoulders at it, and pass on to gratify his pleasures, for the sweetest of them to him was love's discomfiture, and his joy to strike at it and wound it.... Often Violet wished he could have killed her love for him, for then would have died withal that eternal struggle within her between love and her horror of him, whose soul, whether in fulfilment of the legend, or from his inherent wickedness, was as surely Satan's as if with his own blood he had signed the fabled bond. Yet as often as she wished that she cried out on herself at so blasphemous a desire, for she knew that by love alone, though in some manner inscrutable, could redemption come to him.

That creed was inscribed on her heart's core: it was the fabric on which was stitched the embroidery of her days.

PART I

Colin II.

CHAPTER I

THROUGHOUT this hot afternoon of July the terrace had lain empty and soaked in sunshine, and it was not till the shadow of the yew-hedge had crept half-way along it from the west, that Violet Yardley stepped out of the long window of the gallery which lay along the front of the house. Colin was in town; he had said he might possibly return to-day, but, if so, he would telephone. Violet had just asked if any message had come from her husband, and it was with a feeling of relief and remission that she had heard that there was none.

She paused in the doorway with puckered eyelids, as she emerged from the cool dimness of the house into that reverberating brightness. She was bareheaded, and the gold of her hair was so pierced by the sun that it looked as if it shone from some illumination within itself. She had the blue eyes of her race, its fineness of feature and arrogance of bearing, and so like she was to Colin that they could still almost have repeated that jest of his school-days when, on the occasion of a fancy-dress ball, the two had changed costumes with each other half-way through the evening, and had been undetected till Colin's sudden spasm of half-cracked laughter, when a school-friend of his had made a suitable speech to so enchanting a girl, had given them away.... She had changed very little since then, her figure had still the adorable slimness of girl-hood.

There was a small encampment of chairs, with a table laid for tea at the shady end of the terrace and she seemed to be the first to come out from the coolness of the house. Aunt Hester would be here soon or perhaps Violet's father still hobbling from a rather sharp attack of gout, and presently Dennis, her fourteen month-old baby, would be wheeled up and down the terrace by his nurse for his evening airing, and make some more of those intrepid experiments in voluntary locomotion, which were meeting with an increasing but still hazardous success. He appeared to consider his legs as an impediment more than an aid to movement: they got in his way and caused stumbling, but he was rapidly teaching them not to interfere. Colin would be pleased to see the progress his young son had made in his fortnight's absence.

Violet's eyes wandered from the terrace to the blaze of the flower-borders round the lawn below, and beyond to the bright surface of the lake. So still was it and unruffled by any breeze that it might have been covered with a sheet of ice that gleamed blue with the reflection from the sky. At the thought of ice on the lake, there started unbidden into her mind the memory of that terrible morning, only eighteen months ago, when Raymond, Colin's elder twin-brother, had taken his skates down there and had never been seen alive again. She and his father had followed him not long afterwards, and had found his boots on the bank, and a great hole in the ice at the deep end by the sluice, where the rhododendron bushes hung over the lake. It had been terrible, and was there something more terrible yet? Had no-one ever seen Raymond alive after the moment when he left the house? Colin had once said something of casual application, about a drowning man coming up to the surface not three times, as popularly supposed, but once only, and somehow that had suggested to her that he had seen Raymond struggling in the water. There was no cause

why so ghastly an idea should ever have occurred to her; it was more like the unsubstantial remembrance of a nightmare than a waking thought, but it had the haunting vividness of dreams.

There came the brisk tapping of heels along the terrace and Aunt Hester approached. She was small in stature, and carried her sixty years with a dainty lightness. She had on a gay print dress, short in the skirt in true modern fashion, which shewed to great advantage her neat slim calves and tiny ankles. On her head was a broad-brimmed straw-hat, a garden of monstrous blue convolvuluses, and her face was hidden beneath swathes of pale pink veil. Her tripping gait suggested a bird scouring the lawn for its breakfast, and her speech was the argot of smart young ladies in the mid-Victorian epoch.

“Well, thank God, this wretched sun’s got behind the trees at last,” she said, “and I can take off my veil. Sunshine’s a plague to the complexion, my dear. How you stand it, I don’t know. Give me my cup of tea, there’s a good girl; I’m as dry as the desert.”

She unpinned her layers of veil, as Violet poured out her tea, disclosing the prettiest little face, pink and white, of porcelain delicacy.

“Girls to-day ain’t got one decent skin among a score of them,” she observed. “They go playing golf and smoking cigarettes till their faces are like kippers, and then they make them twice as bad by smudging themselves with rouge and powder and muck, till they’re in such a mess as never was. How a young man nowadays can bring himself to kiss one of them without wanting to wash his face afterwards, I don’t know. I like my tea strong, my dear. Hope it’s been standing.”

Violet held out the cup.

“Will that do, Aunt Hester?” she asked. “Or will you wait a little?”

“No, I’ll take that,” said she, “and the next cup will be a bit stronger. Then I shall go for my walk, and get a good perspiration, and have my cold tub, and be ready for my dinner. That’s the way to keep well.”

Violet laughed.

“You’re a marvel, Aunt Hester,” she said. “Colin always says he’ll never be as young as you, even if he lives to be a hundred.”

“Colin’s a wretch,” said Aunt Hester, selecting a piece of hot buttered bun. “He’s making fun of me, pulling my leg as they call it nowadays. Anything been heard of him? Is he coming down to-night?”

“He hasn’t telephoned to say so.”

“Well, I wish he would. Stanier ain’t really Stanier when Colin’s not here. I shall have to run up to town and see what he’s after; mischief I’ll be bound. But Colin’s sunshine’s the only sunshine I’ve any use for. Lord, how his father used to dote on him. And pleased he was, my dear, when you gave poor Raymond the chuck, and took Colin instead.”

“I was thinking about Raymond just now,” said Violet.

“Well, I should have thought you could have found a pleasanter subject than that,” said Lady Hester. “He was a sulky bad-tempered boy was Raymond, and I daresay God knew best, when He let him drown. Not but what I’m sorry for him, but as for pretending to like people just because they’re dead, I call that bunkum, and if I ever die, my dear, which God forbid, I hope you and Colin won’t talk any

trash about me, and say I was the model of all the virtues. Such a pack of nonsense! But don't let's talk about that."

She looked round, and her eyes sharp as a terrier's noticed what Violet had not seen yet. At the far end of the terrace had appeared a wheeled chair pushed by a woman in nurse's costume.

"Why there's my mother," said Lady Hester. "Fancy her coming out!"

This was indeed a most unusual appearance. Old Lady Yardley, mother of Colin's father, of Lady Hester and of Ronald Stanier was now seldom seen until the hour of dinner, when she with her bath-chair was brought down in the lift from her rooms, was wheeled into the long gallery, and, with the help of her crutch-handled stick, transferred herself to the brocaded chair by the fireplace near the dining-room. In the grate, whatever the weather, a couple of logs smouldered into white ash, and by it she sat till the rest were assembled. So she had done for sixty-three years, when first as a bride of eighteen she came to the house, waiting till all were ready when, according to immemorial usage, the major-domo threw open the doors of Lord Yardley's room at the far end of the gallery, and he entered. That had been the custom in the days of her father-in-law, and when her husband reigned, and when her son reigned, up till now when Colin, her grandson, still kept up the ancestral tradition. She seldom spoke but sat through dinner, eating in silence what was put before her, and, in the manner of the very old, regarding now one, now another of her companions with eyes blank and unwinking, but half-veiled with the drooping lids of age. After dinner she played a couple of rubbers of whist, and when they were done she was conveyed back into the silence and sequestration of her room again. There she remained, thickly rimed by the Stanier frost, until the hour came

round for her again to put on her jewels and her evening-gown, and wait by the fireplace for Lord Yardley, be he father-in-law or husband or son or grandson. Colin alone had always the power to galvanize her into life; his presence blew away the white ash that seemed to cover her mind, as it covered those smouldering logs in the fireplace, and disclosed some mysterious pale fire that still burned within. She would nod and smile at him when he kissed her, would listen with pleasure to what he said to her, would ask him sometimes some question about his doings. She might enquire what he had actually done to-day: equally well she might enquire whether he had been out with Raymond, who had been dead this year and a half, or whether his grandfather, who had fallen lifeless across the dining-room table, on the very day that Colin was born, would make one of their whist-table that night. Colin always had some answer that pleased and satisfied her, and sometime next day or maybe a week afterwards she would shew she remembered it by some further question or comment. But she seemed to have no cognizance of any of the others, unless she wanted to know something about Colin. She ate her dinner in silence and in silence played her whist, and waited for the next evening.

She was wheeled now half-way down the terrace, and there her nurse would have turned again, but she gesticulated and pointed to where Violet and Lady Hester were sitting.

“I can’t make out what she wants, my lady,” said the nurse to Violet. “She told me she wished to come out. But it’s so warm, it can’t hurt her.”

Violet went to the side of the bath-chair.

“Well, Granny,” she said. “Have you come out to have tea with Aunt Hester and me?”

Old Lady Yardley looked at her in silence: then transferred that unwinking gaze to Lady Hester. Lady Hester particularly disliked this grim silent observation: it gave her ‘the creeps.’

“I’ll be going for my walk,” she said. “Whatever Mamma wants, my dear, she doesn’t want us.”

“Where’s Colin?” asked old Lady Yardley.

“He hasn’t come, Granny,” said Violet. “I don’t think he’s coming to-day.”

“Yes, he’s coming to-day,” said Lady Yardley. “Is he here now? Is he with Raymond? I want Colin.”

“Granny dear, he’s in London,” said Violet. “We’ll let you know the moment he comes.”

“Just a fad she’s got, my lady,” said the nurse.... It was impossible to speak of old Lady Yardley as if she was there. There was no-one truly there, unless Colin was there, too. The nurse turned to her charge.

“You’d better let me take you back to your rooms, my lady,” she said, “and have a nice rest till dinner-time. You’ve seen for yourself that his lordship isn’t here.”

Old Lady Yardley paid not the smallest attention to this. “I shall wait for Colin on the terrace,” she said to Violet. “I shall wait there till Colin comes. He is coming.”

“Wheel her up and down then,” said Violet to the nurse.

To Aunt Hester’s great relief, old Lady Yardley consented to have her chair turned round, and be wheeled away again.

“She gives me the creeps, my dear,” said Aunt Hester, “though I know she’s my own mother. But there it is! Ever since I can remember she was cold and dead: the iceberg

your Uncle Philip and I used to call her. A beautiful woman she was, too: it's strange that your Uncle Philip and your father were such plain men."

"You took all her good looks, Aunt Hester," said Violet. Aunt Hester loved firm little compliments, laid on with the full spade.

"Well, I had my share of them," she said, "but beauty ran to prettiness in me, and that's a sad seeding. The Stanier style skipped my generation, and I daresay that's why it came out strong in the next. Your Uncle Philip and your father, as I say, two plain men if ever there was one, and yet one was the father of Colin, and the other of you. You two have got it all: that's what's happened. There was never such a pair of Staniers as you, and as like as two peas. Make haste, my dear, and have a dozen sons and daughters, and there'll be a dinner-table worth photographing when you've got your family growing up. Let them all be as wicked as hell, and as long as they have the good looks of their mother and father I'll forgive 'em. There are enough plain folk in the world already who can be models of piety, but when I see a handsome boy, I want to see him kissing a pretty girl, as I'm too old for him now."

"Aunt Hester, you're a pagan," observed Violet.

"I always was, my dear," said she, "and it's pagans who make the world go round. It ain't for long that anyone's fit to look at, so, while youth lasts, for God's sake let them make the most of it. There'll be time for them to lead a godly life when no-one asks them to do anything else. That's what I say."

With which atrocious sentiments, Aunt Hester walked briskly off to get her good perspiration to prepare her for her cold tub and her dinner.

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