

**THE THREE
BROTHERS.**

VOL. I.

BY
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THE THREE BROTHERS.

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THE THREE BROTHERS.

CHAPTER I.

THEIR FATHER.

THE reason why Mr. Renton's sons were sent out into the world in the humble manner, and with the results we are about to record, must be first told, in order that their history may be comprehensible to the reader. Had they been a poor man's sons no explanation would have been necessary; but their father was anything but a poor man. The family was one of those exceptional families which add active exertion to hereditary endowments. Though the Rentons had been well-known people in Berks for two or three centuries, it had almost been a family tradition that each successive heir, instead of resting content with the good things Providence had given him, should add by his own efforts to the family store. There had been pirates among them in Elizabeth's time. They had made money when everybody else lost money in the time of the 'South Sea.' Mr. Renton's father had gone to India young, and had returned, what was then called, a 'Nabob.' Mr. Renton himself was sent off in his turn to Calcutta, as remorselessly as though he had not been the heir to heaven knows how many thousands a-year; and he too had increased the thousands. There was not a prettier estate nor a more commodious house in the whole county than Renton Manor. The town-house was in Berkeley Square. The family had everything handsome about them, and veiled their bonnet to none. Mr. Renton was a man who esteemed wealth as a great power; but he esteemed energy still more, and placed it high above all other qualities. As he is just about to die, and cannot have time to speak for himself in these pages, we may be permitted to describe a personage so important

to this history. He was a spare, middle-sized man, with a singular watchfulness and animation in his looks; his foot springy and light; his sight, and hearing, and all his senses, unusually keen;—a man always on the alert, body and mind, yet not incapable of repose. Restless was not an epithet you could apply to him. A kind of vigilant, quiet readiness and promptitude breathed out from him. He would have sooner died than have taken an unfair advantage over any one; but he was ready to seize upon any and every advantage which was fair and lawful, spying it out with the eyes of an eagle, and coming down upon it with the spring of a giant. Twice, or rather let us say four times in his life he had departed from the traditions of the Rentons. Instead of the notable, capable woman whom they had been wont to choose, and who had helped to make the family what it was, he had married a pretty, useless wife, for no better reason than that he loved her. And partly under her influence, partly by reason of a certain languor and inclination towards personal ease which had crept over him, he had been—as he sometimes felt—basely neglectful of the best interests of his sons. The eldest, Ben, had not been sent to India at sixteen, as his father was; nor had Laurie, the second, gone off to the Colonies, as would have been natural; and as for Frank, his father's weakness had gone so far as to permit of the purchase of a commission for him when the boy had fallen in love with a red coat. Frank was a Guardsman, and he a Renton! Such a thing had never been heard of in the family before.

The eldest surviving aunt, Mrs. Westbury, who was full of Renton traditions, almost went mad of this event, so afflicted was she by such a departure from use and wont. She had two boys of her own, whom she had steadfastly kept in the family groove, and, accordingly, had the very best grounds for her indignation. 'But

what was to be expected,' she said, 'from such a wife?' Mrs. Renton was as harmless a soul as ever lay on a sofa, and had little more than a passive influence in the affairs of her family; but her husband's sister, endowed with that contempt for the masculine understanding which most women entertain, put all the blame upon her soft shoulders. Two men-about-town, and a boy in the Guards! 'Is Laurence mad?' said Mrs. Westbury. It was her own son who had gone to the house in Calcutta, which might have mollified her; but it did not. 'My boy has to banish himself, and wear out the best of his life in that wilderness,' she said, vehemently, 'while Ben Renton makes a fool of himself at home.' When they brought their fine friends to the Manor for shooting or fishing, she had always something to say of her boy who was banished from all these pleasures; though, indeed, there had been a great rejoicing in the Westbury household when Richard got the appointment. It was but a very short time before her brother's death that Aunt Lydia's feelings became too many for her, and she felt that for once she must speak and deliver her soul.

'Ben is to succeed you, I suppose?' she said, perhaps in rather an unsympathetic way, as she took Mr. Renton to the river-side for a walk, under pretence of speaking to him 'about the boys.' He thought, poor man, that it was her own boys she meant, and was very good-natured about it. And then it was his favourite walk. The river ran through the Renton woods, at the foot of a steep bank, and was visible from some of the windows of the Manor. The road to it was a charming woodland walk, embowered in great beeches, the special growth of Berks. Through their vast branches, and round about their giant trunks, playing with the spectator's charmed vision like a child, came glimpses of the broad, soft water, over which willows hung fondly, and the swans and water-lilies

shone. Mr. Renton was not sentimental, but he had known the river all his life, and was fond of it;—perhaps all the more so as he found out what mistakes he had made, and that life had not been expended to so much purpose as it ought to have been; so that he walked down very willingly with his sister, and inclined his ear with much patience and good-nature to hear what she had to say about her boys.

‘Ben will succeed you, I suppose?’ she said, looking at him in a disapproving way, as they came to the very margin of the stream where Laurie’s boat, with its brightly painted sides and red cushions reflected in the water, lay moored by the bank. It was a fantastic little toy, meant for speed, and not for safety; and Mrs. Westbury would have walked ten miles round by Oakley Bridge rather than have trusted herself to that arrowy bark. She sighed as her eyes fell upon it. ‘Poor Laurie! poor boy!’ she said, shaking her head. The sight seemed to fill her with a compassion beyond words.

‘Why poor Laurie?’ said Mr. Renton; but he knew what she meant, and it made him angry. ‘Of course Ben will succeed me. I succeeded my father. It is his right.’

‘Ah, Laurence, but how did you succeed your father?’ said Mrs. Westbury. ‘You had the satisfaction of being the greatest comfort to dear papa. He felt the property would be safe in your hands, and be improved, as it has always been. People say we are such a lucky family, but you and I know better. We know it is work that has always done it,—alas! until now!’ she said, suddenly lifting up her eyes to heaven. Truth compels us to add that Mr. Renton was very much disconcerted. He could not bear to hear his own family attacked; but he felt the justice of all she said.

‘Well, Lydia, manners change,’ he said. ‘It seemed natural enough in our time; but, when you come to consider it, I don’t see what reason I have for sending the boys away. I can leave them very well off. We were never so well off as we are now. You know I managed to buy that last farm my father had set his mind upon. I don’t see why I should have broken their mother’s heart.’

‘Ah, I knew it would come out,’ said Mrs. Westbury, with a little bitterness. ‘Why should Mary’s heart be more tender than other people’s? I have to send my boys away, though I love them as well as she does hers; and people congratulate me on having such a good appointment for Richard. It never occurs to anybody that I shall break my heart.’

‘You are a Renton,’ said her brother, with some dexterity. ‘I often think you are the best Renton of us all. But if poor Westbury had lived, you know, he might have contrived to spare you the parting, as I have spared Mary; and—— The short and the long of it is the boys are doing very well. I have no fault to find with them, and I mean to take my own way with my own family, Lydia; no offence to you.’

‘Oh, no; no offence,’ said Mrs. Westbury, with a little toss of her head. ‘It is all for my advantage, I am sure. When my Richard comes home at a proper time with the fortune your Ben ought to have made, I shall have no reason to complain for one.’

‘Ben will be very well off,’ said Mr. Renton, but with an uncomfortable smile.

‘Oh, very well off, no doubt,’ said his sister, with a touch of contempt; ‘a vapid squire, like the rest of them. People used to say the Rentons were like a fresh breeze blowing in the county.’

Always motion and stir where they were! And, poor Laurie!' she added once more, with offensive compassion, as they turned and came again face to face with Laurie's boat.

'I should like to know why Laurie so particularly excites your pity,' said Mr. Renton, much irritated. Laurie was his own namesake and favourite, and this was the animadversion which he could least bear.

'Poor boy! I don't know who would not pity him,' said Aunt Lydia; 'it would melt a heart of stone to see a boy with such abilities all going to wrack and ruin. It is all very well as long as he is at home; but when he comes to have his own money what will he do with it? Spend it on pictures and nonsense, and encourage a set of idle people about him to eat him up. Laurence, you mark my words—that is just the kind of boy to be eaten up by everybody, and to come to poverty in the end. Whereas, if he had been taught from the first that work was the natural destiny of man——'

'There, Lydia,—there,—I wish you would make an end of this croaking,' cried Mr. Renton. 'I am not quite well to-day, and can't bear it. That's enough for one time.'

'As for Frank, I give him up,' said Mrs. Westbury,—'a soldier, that can never make a penny,—and, of all soldiers, a Guardsman! I am very sorry for you, Laurence, I am sure. How a man of your sense could give in so to Mary's whims I can't understand.'

'Mary had nothing to do with it,' said Mr. Renton angrily; and he led the way up the bank, and changed the subject abruptly. Mrs. Westbury, though she was not susceptible, felt that she must say no more; and they returned in comparative silence to the house. This walk had been taken late in a summer evening after dinner, and in

the solemnity of evening dress, over which, Aunt Lydia, who was stout and felt the heat, had thrown a little shawl. As they reached the lawn in front of the Manor they came upon a pretty scene. Mrs. Renton, who was feebly pretty still, lay on a sofa, which had been brought out and placed in the shadow of the trees. Mary Westbury, her godchild, who bore a curious softened resemblance to her mother, sat upright on a footstool by her aunt's side, working and talking to her. The third figure was Laurie, lying at full length on the soft grass. Probably since dinner he had been having a cigar; for instead of the regular evening coat he wore a fantastic velvet vestment, which half veiled the splendour of his white linen and white tie. He was lying stretched out on his back,—handsome, lazy, and contented,—a practical commentary on his aunt's speech. There were books lying about, which his energetic cousin had been coaxing and boring him to read aloud; but Laurie had only shaken his head at her, ruffling his chestnut locks against the grass: and a little sketch-book lay by his side, where it had fallen from his indolent hand. Mrs. Westbury looked at him and then at her brother. What words could say as much? There lay lazy Laurence, with an unspeakable sentiment of *far niente*, in every line of him; and he a Renton, whose very ease had always been energetic! Mr. Renton saw it, too, and, for once in his life, was heartily ashamed of his favourite son.

‘There you lie,’ said Aunt Lydia, ‘resting after your hard day's work. What a laborious young man you must be, Laurie! I never saw any one who wanted so much rest.’

‘Thanks,’ said Laurence, with a little nod of his chin from the grass. ‘My constitution requires a great deal of rest, as you say. If you don't mind moving a little, Aunt Lydia, you are sitting on my

note-book. Thanks. There are some swans there I should not like to lose.'

'And of what use are swans?' said Mrs. Westbury. 'I wish you would tell me, Laurie; I am such an ignorant creature, and I should like to know.'

'Use?' said Laurie, opening his eyes. 'They don't get made into patties, as far as I know;—but they are of about as much use as the most of us, I suppose.'

'The most of us have a great deal to do in the world,' said Aunt Lydia, growing very red, for she was fond of *pâtés*; 'if you knew how many things have to pass through my hands from morning to night——'

'Yes, I know,' said lazy Laurence, raising his hand in soft deprecation. 'Mary has been telling us;—but what is the use of that, Aunt Lydia? Why should you worry yourself? Things would go on just as well if you let them alone,—that's what I always tell Ben. What's the good of fidgeting? If you'll believe,' continued Laurie, raising himself a little on one elbow, 'all the people who have ever made any mark in the world have been people who knew how to keep quiet and let things work themselves out. There's your Queen Elizabeth,' he said, warming to his subject, and giving a slight kick with his polished boot to a big volume on the grass; 'the only quality she had was a masterly inaction. She kept quiet, and things settled themselves.'

'Oh, Laurie! not when she killed that poor, dear, Queen Mary!' cried his mother from the sofa. 'I hate that woman's very name.'

‘No,’ said Laurie, gracefully sinking down again among the grass, ‘that’s an instance of energy, mother,—a brutal quality, that always comes to harm.’

‘Laurence, you are a fool!’ said Mr. Renton sharply, to his son’s surprise; and he turned his back upon them all abruptly, and went in across the soft grass, through the magical, evening atmosphere that tempted all the world to rest. His sister had taken all restfulness out of him. Though he was a sensible man, he was a Renton; and the family traditions when thus recalled to his mind had a great power over him. He went into the library, which looked out upon a dark corner of the grounds full of mournful evergreens; the blank wall of the kitchen-garden showed a little behind them, and the room at this time of day was a very doleful room. It was a kind of penance to put upon himself to come in from that air, all full of lingering hues of sunset and soft suggestions of falling dew, to the grim-luxurious room, in which he already wanted artificial light. Here he sat and pondered over his own life, and that of his boys. Up to this moment they had been a great deal happier than he had been. Like a gust of air from the old plains of his youth, a remembrance came over him of loneliness and wistfulness, and a certain impossible longing for a little pleasure now and then, and some love to brighten the boyish days. He had not been aware of wanting those vanities then; but he saw now that he had done so, and that his youth had been very bare and unlovely. He had scattered roses before his sons, while only thorns had been in his own path; but what if he had kept from them the harder training which should make them men? He sat till the darkness grew almost into night thinking over these things. They were men now,—the lads. Ben was five-and-twenty; Laurie but a year younger; and Frank, the happy boy, was only twenty, glorious in his red coat. Mr.

Renton pondered long, and when the lamp came he made a great many notes and calculations, which he locked up carefully in his desk. He had a headache, which was very unusual. It was his wife's *rôle* in the family to have the headaches; and it did not occur to Mr. Renton that there could be anything the matter with him. It was the heat, no doubt, or a little worry. The ladies had come into the drawing-room when his ponderings were over. It was a large room, full of windows, with one large bow projecting out upon the cliff, from which you could see the river through the cloud of intervening beeches. On the other side the room was open to the soft darkness of the lawn. There were two lamps in it, but both were shadowed; for Mrs. Renton's eyes, like her head, were weak; and the cool air of night breathed in, odorous and soft, making a scarcely perceptible draught from window to window. Mrs. Renton lay quite out of this current of air, which naturally she was afraid of, on another sofa. Mary made tea in a corner, with the light of one of the lamps falling concentrated upon her pretty hands in twinkling motion about the brilliant little spots of china and silver. She had a ring or two upon her pink transparent fingers, and a bracelet, which sparkled in the light. Mrs. Westbury sat apart in a great chair, and fanned herself. Now and then, with a dash against the delicate *abat-jour* of the lamp, came a mad moth, bent on self-destruction. Mr. Renton dropped into the first chair he could find, not knowing why he was so uncomfortable, and Mary brought him some tea. The weather had been very warm, and everybody was languid with the heat. They all sat a great way apart from each other, and were not energetic enough for conversation. 'Where is Laurie?' Mr. Renton asked; and they told him that Laurie, with his usual wilfulness, had gone down to the river. 'There will be a moon to-night,' Mrs. Renton said, with some fretfulness; for she

liked to have one of her boys by her, if only lying on the grass, or on the deep mossy carpet, which was almost as soft as the grass.

‘He has gone off to his moonlight, and his swans, and his water-lilies,’ said Mrs. Westbury, with disdain; but even she felt the heat too much to proceed.

‘The water-lilies are closed at night,’ said Mary apologetically; venturing to this extent to take her cousin’s part; lazy Laurence was a favourite with most people, though he had no energy. Then, all at once, a larger swoop than usual went circling through the dim upper atmosphere of the room, and Mrs. Renton gave a scream.

‘It is a bat!’ she cried. ‘Ring, Mary, ring,—I am so superstitious about bats; and Laurie out all by himself on that river. Mr. Renton, I wish you would put a stop to it. I never can think it is safe. Oh, tell them to drive out that creature, Mary! I always know something must happen when a bat comes into one’s room.’

‘No, godmamma, never mind,’ said Mary. ‘It is only the light. How should a bat know anything that was going to happen? They come into the Cottage every evening, and we never mind.’

‘Then you will be found some morning dead in your beds,’ said Mrs. Renton; ‘I know you will. Oh, it makes me so unhappy, Mary! and Laurie all by himself in that horrid little boat!’

‘Laurie is all right,’ said Mr. Renton; ‘he knows how to manage a boat, if he knows nothing else.’ This was muttered half to himself and half aloud; and then he went to the bow-window and looked out upon the river. The moon had just risen, and was shining straight down upon one gleam of water which blazed intensely white amid all the darkling shadows. As Mr. Renton

stood looking out, a boat shot into this gleaming spot, with long oars glistening, balancing, touching the water like wings of a bird. 'Laurie is all right,' he said to himself, in a mechanical way. He did not himself care for a thousand bats. But his wife's alarm struck into his own uneasiness like a key-note,—the key-note to something he could not tell what. It was all so lovely and peaceful as he looked, soft glooms, soft light, rustling rhythm of foliage, wistful breathing of the night air over that pleasant landscape he knew so well. After all, was it not better to have the boy there in his boat, than scorching out in India or toiling like a slave in some Canadian or Australian forest? What is the good of the father's work but to better the condition of the sons? But, on the other hand, if life when it came should find the sons incapable? Mr. Renton had been a prosperous man; but he knew that life was no holiday. When it came like an armed man with temptations, and cares, and responsibilities upon that silken boy, how would he meet it? These were the father's thoughts as the bat was hunted out with much commotion, and his wife lay sighing on her sofa. If he had been well, probably, Mrs. Westbury's talk would have had no such effect upon him; but he was not well; and it had made him very ill at ease.

Next day his lawyer came, and was closeted for a long time with him, and there were witnesses called in,—the Rector who happened to be calling, and the lawyer's clerk—to witness Mr. Renton's signature. And within a week, though he was still in what is called the prime of life, the father of the house was dead; and his will alone remained behind him to govern the fate of his three sons.

CHAPTER II.

THE WILL.

THERE was great consternation in the family when this sudden misfortune came upon it. All the bustling household from the Cottage overflowed into the Manor in the excitement of the unlooked-for event; and the eldest and the youngest son came as fast as the telegraph could summon them to their father's bedside. During the two or three days of his illness the three young men wandered about the place, as young men do when there is fatal illness in a house—useless,—not liking to go about their usual employments, and not knowing what else to do. They took silent walks up and down to the river, and cast wistful looks at the boats, and dropped now and then into ordinary conversation, only to break off and pull themselves up with contrition when they remembered. They were very good sons, and felt their father's danger, and would have done anything for him; but there are no special arts or occupations made for men in such circumstances. The only alternative the poor boys had was to resort to their ordinary pleasures, or to do nothing; and they did nothing, as that was the most respectful thing to do,—and were as dispirited and miserable as heart could desire.

On the last day of all they were called up together to their father's death-bed. He had known from the first that he was going to die; and Mrs. Westbury, who was his principal nurse, and a very kind and patient one, had felt that her brother had something on his mind. More than once she had exhorted him to speak out and relieve himself; but he had always turned his face to the wall when she made this proposition. It was a close, warm, silent afternoon

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