

# WHITELADIES

*A NOVEL*

BY  
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# **WHITELADIES.**

## CHAPTER I.

IT was an old manor-house, not a deserted convent, as you might suppose by the name. The conventual buildings from which no doubt the place had taken its name, had dropped away, bit by bit, leaving nothing but one wall of the chapel, now closely veiled and mantled with ivy, behind the orchard, about a quarter of a mile from the house. The lands were Church lands, but the house was a lay house, of an older date than the family who had inhabited it from Henry VIII.'s time, when the priory was destroyed, and its possessions transferred to the manor. No one could tell very clearly how this transfer was made, or how the family of Austins came into being. Before that period no trace of them was to be found. They sprang up all at once, not rising gradually into power, but appearing full-blown as proprietors of the manor, and possessors of all the confiscated lands. There was a tradition in the family of some wild, tragical union of an emancipated nun with a secularized friar—a kind of repetition of Luther and his Catherine, but with results less comfortable than those which followed the marriage of those German souls. With the English convertites the issue was not happy, as the story goes. Their broken vows haunted them; their possessions, which were not theirs, but the Church's, lay heavy on their consciences; and they died early, leaving descendants with whose history a thread of perpetual misfortune was woven. The family history ran in a succession of long minorities, the line of inheritance gliding from one branch to the other, the direct thread breaking constantly. To die young, and leave orphan children behind; or to die younger still, letting the line drop and fall back upon cadets of the house, was the usual fate of the Austins of

Whiteladies—unfortunate people who bore the traces of their original sin in their very name.

Miss Susan Austin was, at the moment when this story begins, seated in the porch of the manor, on a blazing day of July, when every scrap of shade was grateful and pleasant, and when the deep coolness of the old-fashioned porch was a kind of paradise. It was a very fine old house, half brick, half timber; the eaves of the high gables carved into oaken lace-work; the lattice casements shining out of velvet clothing of ivy; and the great projecting window of the old hall, stepping out upon the velvet lawn, all glass from roof to ground, with only one richly-carved strip of panelling to frame it into the peaked roof. The door stood wide open, showing a long passage floored with red bricks, one wall of which was all casement, the other broken by carved and comely oaken doors, three or four centuries old. The porch was a little wider than the passage, and had a mullioned window in it, by the side of the great front opening, all clustered over with climbing roses. Looking out from the red-floored passage, the eye went past Miss Susan in the porch, to the sweet, luxuriant greenness of the lime-trees on the farther side of the lawn, which ended the prospect. The lawn was velvet green; the trees were silken soft, and laden with blossoms; the roses fluttered in at the open porch window, and crept about the door. Every beam in the long passage, every door, the continuous line of casement, the many turns by which this corridor led, meandering, with wealth of cool and airy space, toward the house, were all centuries old, bearing the stamp of distant generations upon the carved wood and endless windings; but without, everything was young and sunny,—grass and daisies and lime-blossoms, bees humming, birds twittering, the roses waving up and down in the soft wind. I wish the figure of Miss Susan had

belonged to this part of the landscape; but, alas! historical accuracy forbids romancing. She was the virtual mistress of the house, in absence of a better; but she was not young, nor had she been so for many a long day.

Miss Susan was about sixty, a comely woman of her age, with the fair hair and blue eyes of the Austins. Her hair was so light that it did not turn gray; and her eyes, though there were wrinkles round them, still preserved a certain innocence and candor of aspect which, ill-natured people said, had helped Miss Susan to make many a hard bargain, so guileless was their aspect. She was dressed in a gray gown of woollen stuff (alpaca, I think, for it is best to be particular); her hair was still abundant, and she had no cap on it, nor any covering. In her day the adoption of a cap had meant the acceptance of old age, and Miss Susan had no intention of accepting that necessity a moment before she was obliged to do so. The sun, which had begun to turn westward, had been blazing into the drawing-room, which looked that way, and Miss Susan had been driven out of her own chair and her own corner by it—an unwarrantable piece of presumption. She had been obliged to fly before it, and she had taken refuge in the porch, which faced to the north, and where shelter was to be found. She had her knitting in her hands; but if her countenance gave any clue to her mind's occupation, something more important than knitting occupied her thoughts. She sat on the bench which stood on the deepest side between the inner and the outer entrance, knitting silently, the air breathing soft about her, the roses rustling. For a long time she did not once raise her head. The gardener was plodding about his work outside, now and then crossing the lawn with heavy, leisurely foot, muffled by the velvet of the old immemorial turf. Within there would now and then come an indistinct sound of voice or

movement through the long passage; but nothing was visible, except the still gray figure in the shade of the deep porch.

By-and-by, however, this silence was broken. First came a maid, carrying a basket, who was young and rosy, and lighted up the old passage with a gleam of lightness and youthful color.

“Where are you going, Jane?” said Miss Susan.

“To the almshouse, please,” said Jane, passing out with a curtsy.

After her came another woman, at ten minutes’ interval, older and staid, in trim bonnet and shawl, with a large carpet-bag.

“Where are you going, Martha?” said the lady again.

“Please, ma’am, to the almshouse,” said Martha.

Miss Susan shrugged her shoulders slightly, but said no more.

A few minutes of silence passed, and then a heavy foot, slow and solemn, which seemed to come in procession from a vast distance, echoing over miles of passage, advanced gradually, with a protestation in every footfall. It was the butler, Stevens, a portly personage, with a countenance somewhat flushed with care and discontent.

“Where are you going, Stevens?” said Miss Susan.

“I’m going where I don’t want to go, mum,” said Stevens, “and where I don’t hold with; and if I might make so bold as to say so, where you ought to put a stop to, if so be as you don’t want to be ruined and done for—you and Miss Augustine, and all the house.”

“‘Ruinated’ is a capital word,” said Miss Susan, blandly, “very forcible and expressive; but, Stevens, I don’t think we’ll come to that yet awhile.”

“Going on like this is as good a way as any,” grumbled the man, “encouraging an idle set of good-for-nothings to eat up ladies as takes that turn. I’ve seen it afore, Miss Austin. You gets imposed upon, right hand and left hand; and as for doing good!—No, no, this ain’t the way.”

Stevens, too had a basket to carry, and the afternoon was hot and the sun blazing. Between the manor and the almshouses there lay a long stretch of hot road, without any shade to speak of. He had reason, perhaps, to grumble over his unwilling share in these liberal charities. Miss Susan shrugged her shoulders again, this time with a low laugh at the butler’s perturbation, and went on with her knitting. In a few minutes another step became audible, coming along the passage—a soft step with a little hesitation in it—every fifth or sixth footfall having a slight pause or shuffle which came in a kind of rhythm. Then a tall figure came round the corner, relieved against the old carved doorway at the end and the bright redness of the brick floor; a tall, very slight woman, peculiarly dressed in a long, limp gown, of still lighter gray than the one Miss Susan wore, which hung closely about her, with long hanging sleeves hanging half way down the skirt of her dress, and something like a large hood depending from her shoulders. As the day was so warm, she had not drawn this hood over her head, but wore a light black gauze scarf, covering her light hair. She was not much younger than her sister, but her hair was still lighter, having some half visible mixture of gray, which whitened its tone. Her eyes were blue, but pale, with none of the warmth in them of Miss Susan’s. She carried her head a little on one side, and, in short, she

was like nothing in the world so much as a mediæval saint out of a painted window, of the period when painted glass was pale in color, and did not blaze in blues and rubies. She had a basket too, carried in both her hands, which came out of the long falling lines of her sleeves with a curious effect. Miss Augustine's basket, however, was full of flowers—roses, and some long white stalks of lilies, not quite over, though it was July, and long branches of jasmine covered with white stars.

“So you are going to the almshouses too?” said her sister. “I think we shall soon have to go and live there ourselves, as Stevens says, if this is how you are going on.”

“Ah, Susan, that would indeed be the right thing to do, if you could make up your mind to it,” said her sister, in a low, soft, plaintive voice, “and let the Church have her own again. Then perhaps our sacrifice, dear, might take away the curse.”

“Fiddlesticks!” said Miss Susan. “I don't believe in curses. But, Austine, my dear, everybody tells me you are doing a great deal too much.”

“Can one do too much for God's poor?”

“If we were sure of that now,” said Miss Susan, shaking her head; “but some of them, I am afraid, belong to—the other person. However, I won't have you crossed; but, Austine, you might show a little moderation. You have carried off Jane and Martha and Stevens: if any one comes, who is to open the door?”

“The doors are all open, and you are here,” said Miss Augustine calmly. “You would not have the poor suffer for such a trifle? But I hope you will have no visitors to disturb your thoughts.

I have been meditating much this morning upon that passage, 'Behold, our days are as a weaver's shuttle.' Think of it, dear. We have got much, much to do, Susan, to make up for the sins of our family."

"Fiddlesticks," said Miss Susan again; but she said it half playfully, with tones more gentle than her decided expression of face would have prophesied. "Go away to your charities," she added. "If you do harm, you do it in a good way, and mean well, poor soul, God knows; so I hope no mischief will come of it. But send me Stevens home as soon as may be, Austine, for the sake of my possible meditations, if for nothing else; for there's nobody left in the house but old Martin and the boy, and the women in the kitchen."

"What should we want with so many servants?" said Miss Augustine with a sigh; and she walked slowly out of the porch, under the rose-wreaths, and across the lawn, the sun blazing upon her light dress and turning it into white, and beating fiercely on her uncovered head.

"Take a parasol, for heaven's sake," said Miss Susan; but the white figure glided on, taking no notice. The elder sister paused for a moment in her knitting, and looked after the other with that look, half tender, half provoked, with which we all contemplate the vagaries of those whom we love, but do not sympathize with, and whose pursuits are folly to us. Miss Susan possessed what is called "strong sense," but she was not intolerant, as people of strong sense so often are; at least she was not intolerant to her sister, who was the creature most unlike her, and whom she loved best in the world.

The manor-house did not belong to the Misses Austin, but they had lived in it all their lives. Their family history was not a bright one, as I have said; and their own immediate portion of the family had not fared better than the previous generations. They had one brother who had gone into the diplomatic service, and had married abroad and died young, before the death of their father, leaving two children, a boy and a girl, who had been partially brought up with the aunts. Their mother was a Frenchwoman, and had married a second time. The two children, Herbert and Reine, had passed half of their time with her, half with their father's sisters; for Miss Susan had been appointed their guardian by their father, who had a high opinion of her powers. I do not know that this mode of education was very good for the young people; but Herbert was one of those gentle boys predestined to a short life, who take little harm by spoiling. He was dying now at one-and-twenty, among the Swiss hills, whither he had been taken, when the weather grew hot, from one of the invalid refuges on the Mediterranean shore. He was perishing slowly, and all false hope was over, and everybody knew it—a hard fate enough for his family; but there were other things involved which made it harder still. The estate of Whiteladies was strictly entailed. Miss Susan and Miss Augustine Austin had been well provided for by a rich mother, but their French sister-in-law had no money and another family, and Reine had no right to the lands, or to anything but a very humble portion left to her by her father; and the old ladies had the prospect before them of being turned out of the house they loved, the house they had been born in, as soon as their nephew's feeble existence should terminate. The supposed heir-at-law was a gentleman in the neighborhood, distantly related, and deeply obnoxious to them. I say the supposed heir—for there was a break in the Austin pedigree, upon which, at the present time, the Misses Austin and

all their friends dwelt with exceeding insistance. Two or three generations before, the second son of the family had quarrelled with his father and disappeared entirely from England. If he had any descendants, they, and not Mr. Farrel-Austin, were the direct heirs. Miss Susan had sent envoys over all the known world seeking for these problematic descendants of her granduncle Everard. Another young Austin, of a still more distant stock, called Everard too, and holding a place in the succession after Mr. Farrel-Austin, had gone to America even, on the track of some vague Austins there, who were not the people he sought; and though Miss Susan would not give up the pursuit, yet her hopes were getting feeble; and there seemed no likely escape from the dire necessity of giving up the manor, and the importance (which she did not dislike) of the position it gave her as virtual mistress of a historical house, to a man she disliked and despised, the moment poor Herbert's breath should be out of his body. Peacefully, therefore, as the scene had looked before the interruptions above recorded, Miss Susan was not happy, nor were her thoughts of a cheerful character. She loved her nephew, and the approaching end to which all his relations had long looked forward hung over her like a cloud, with that dull sense of pain, soon to become more acute, which impending misfortune, utterly beyond our power to avert, so often brings; and mingled with this were the sharper anxieties and annoyances of the quest she had undertaken, and its ill success up to this moment; and the increasing probability that the man she disliked, and no other, must be her successor, her supplanter in her home. Her mind was full of such thoughts; but she was a woman used to restrain her personal sentiments, and keep them to herself, having been during her long life much alone, and without any companion in whom she was accustomed to confide. The two sisters had never been separated in their lives; but Augustine, not

Susan, was the one who disclosed her feelings and sought for sympathy. In most relations of life there is one passive and one active, one who seeks and one who gives. Miss Augustine was the weaker of the two, but in this respect she was the more prominent. She was always the first to claim attention, to seek the interest of the other; and for years long her elder sister had been glad to give what she asked, and to keep silent about her own sentiments, which the other might not have entered into. "What was the use?" Miss Susan said to herself; and shrugged her shoulders and kept her troubles, which were very different from Augustine's in her own breast.

How pleasant it was out there in the porch! the branches of the lime-trees blown about softly by the wind; a daisy here and there lifting its roguish saucy head, which somehow had escaped the scythe, from the close-mown lawn; the long garlands of roses playing about the stone mullions of the window, curling round the carved lintel of the door; the cool passage on the other side leading into the house, with its red floor and carved doors, and long range of casement. Miss Susan scarcely lifted her eyes from her knitting, but every detail of the peaceful scene was visible before her. No wonder—she had learned them all by heart in the long progress of the years. She knew every twig on the limes, every bud on the roses. She sat still, scarcely moving, knitting in with her thread many an anxious thought, many a wandering fancy, but with a face serene enough, and all about her still. It had never been her habit to betray what was in her to an unappreciative world.

She brightened up a little, however, and raised her head, when she heard the distant sound of a whistle coming far off through the melodious Summer air. It caught her attention, and she raised her head for a second, and a smile came over her face. "It must be

Everard," she said to herself, and listened, and made certain, as the air, a pretty gay French air, became more distinct. No one else would whistle that tune. It was one of Reine's French songs—one of those graceful little melodies which are so easy to catch and so effective. Miss Susan was pleased that he should whistle one of Reine's tunes. She had her plans and theories on this point, as may be hereafter shown; and Everard besides was a favorite of her own, independent of Reine. Her countenance relaxed, her knitting felt lighter in her hand, as the whistle came nearer, and then the sound of a firm, light step. Miss Susan let the smile dwell upon her face, not dismissing it, and knitted on, expecting calmly till he should make his appearance. He had come to make his report to her of another journey, from which he had just returned, in search of the lost Austins. It had not been at all to his own interest to pursue this search, for, failing Mr. Farrel-Austin, he himself would be the heir-at-law; but Everard, as Miss Susan had often said to herself, was not the sort of person to think of his own advantage. He was, if anything, too easy on that head—too careless of what happened to himself individually. He was an orphan with a small income—that "just enough" which is so fatal an inheritance for a young man—nominally at "the Bar," actually nowhere in the race of life, but very ready to do anything for anybody, and specially for his old cousins, who had been good to him in his youth. He had a small house of his own on the river not far off, which the foolish young man lived in only a few weeks now and then, but which he refused to let, for no reason but because it had been his mother's, and her memory (he thought) inhabited the place. Miss Susan was so provoked with this and other follies that she could have beaten Everard often, and then hugged him—a mingling of feelings not unusual. But as Everard is just about to appear in his own person, I need not describe him further. His whistle came along, advancing

through the air, the pleasantest prelude to his appearance. Something gay and free and sweet was in the sound, the unconscious self-accompaniment of a light heart. He whistled as he went for want of thought—nay, not for want of thought, but because all the movements of his young soul were as yet harmonious, lightsome, full of hope and sweetness; his gay personality required expression; he was too light-hearted, too much at home in the world, and friendly, to come silent along the sunshiny way. So, as he could not talk to the trees and the air, like a poetical hero in a tragedy, Everard made known his good-will to everything, and delicious, passive happiness, by his whistle; and he whistled like a lark, clear and sweet; it was one of his accomplishments. He whistled Miss Susan's old airs when she played them on her old piano, in charming time and harmony; and he did not save his breath for drawing-room performances, but sent before him these pleasant intimations of his coming, as far as a mile off. To which Miss Susan sat and listened, waiting for his arrival, with a smile on her face.

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