

**WITHIN  
THE PRECINCTS**

VOLUME 1

BY  
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**WITHIN THE PRECINCTS.**

# CHAPTER I.

## ST. MICHAEL'S.

THE Abbey Church of St. Michael's stands on a low hill in a flat and fertile country. The holy places which are sacred to the great archangel seem to settle naturally upon a mount; and this, one of the noblest structures consecrated under his name, had all the effect of a very high elevation—so wide-spreading was the landscape round, so vast the sweep of plain, fields, and woods, great parks and commons, and gleaming white villages like ships at sea, which could be seen from its walls and terraces. Though the settlement was ecclesiastical, the place had been walled and defensible in the days when danger threatened wealth whatever form it assumed. Danger, however, had long been far from the thoughts of the dignified corporation which held its reverend court upon the hill. The Abbey was as splendid as any cathedral, and possessed a dean and chapter, though no bishop. It was of Late Gothic, perpendicular and magnificent; and the walls and towers which still surrounded it, and even the old houses within the precincts, were older still than the Abbey, and could have furnished many "bits" to make the heart of a mediæval architect glad. The very turf which filled the quadrangle and clothed the slope of the Dean's Walk was a production of centuries; the Chapter House was full of historical documents, and the library of rare books; and there were antiquarian fanatics who protested that the wealthy livings belonging to the Abbey, and its old endowments, were the least of its riches. Nor was this establishment on the hill confined to ecclesiastical interests only. The beautiful church was the chapel of an order of knighthood, and

opposite to it—forming an integral part of the pile of buildings—was a line of small ancient houses, forming a kind of screen and inner wall of defence to the sacred citadel, which were the lodges of a supplementary order of pensioners—Chevaliers of St. Michael—which at the time of the foundation had given such a balance, as the Middle Ages loved, of Christian charity and help, to the splendour and braggadocio of the more glorious knights. Thus the little community which inhabited this noble old pile of buildings was varied and composite. The highest official in it was the costly and aristocratic Dean, the lowest the lay clerks, who were housed humbly in the shadow of the church in a little cloister of their own, and who daily filled the Abbey with the noblest music. The Deanery was close to the Abbey, and embraced in its irregular group of roofs the great tower, which showed for miles round, with its lighted windows, rising up into the night. The canons' houses, if not equally fine, were still great old houses, standing on the edge of the hill, their walls rising straight from the green slopes dotted with trees, round the foot of which a little red-roofed town had gathered; and the Abbey itself stood between those stately habitations and the humbler lodges of the Chevaliers, which shut off the lower level of sloping bank on the other side. The Dean himself was of a great family, and belonged not only to the nobility, but, higher still, to the most select circles of fashion, and had a noble wife and such a position in society as many a bishop envied; and among his canons were men not only of family, but possessed of some mild links of connection with the worlds of learning and scholarship,—even it was said that one had writ a book in days when books were not so common. The minor canons were of humbler degree; they formed the link between gods and men, so to speak—between the Olympus of the Chapter and the common secular sphere below. We will not deceive the reader nor

buoy him up with hopes that this history concerns the lofty fortunes of the members of that sacred and superior class. To no such distinction can these humble pages aspire; our office is of a lowlier kind. On Olympus the doings are all splendid, if not, as old chronicles tell, much wiser than beneath, amid the humbler haunts of men. All that we can do is to tell how these higher circles looked, to eyes gazing keenly upon them from the mullioned windows which gave a subdued light to the little rooms of the Chevaliers' lodges on the southern side of St. Michael's Hill.

These lodges were two storeys in height, with small rooms and very solid masonry, little gardens in front of them, and a tower at each end. Many creeping plants clung about the old walls, and especially there were clouds of Virginia creeper which made them glorious in autumn. It was, however, on a summer afternoon, at the time this history begins, that Lottie Despard—the only daughter of Captain Despard, a Chevalier not very long appointed to that office—sat, with her head out through the open window, framed between the mullions, watching the broad slope of the Dean's Walk which lay between her and the church, and led to the Deanery and the heights beyond. The Deanery was at this moment the most important place in the world, not only to Lottie, but to many other spectators who thronged the slope beneath her window. For this day a great event had happened in St. Michael's. The Dean's only daughter, Augusta Huntington, had been married that morning with all the pomp imaginable. It had been like a royal wedding, sumptuous in ritual, in music, and fine company; and now, after taking a little repose during the time which the wedding-party spent at breakfast, the Abbey precincts were beginning to fill again with gazing groups, and all the people within were coming to their windows to see the bride and bridegroom go away.

Lottie Despard was beyond all comparison the prettiest, and she was also the youngest, of all the ladies in the lodges. She was of Irish descent, and she had the whiteness of skin, the blackness of abundant hair, the deep blue eyes that so often go with Milesian blood. Such eyelashes had never been seen at St. Michael's; indeed, they had never been seen anywhere "out of Mrs. Jarley's waxworks!" some ill-natured critics said. Sometimes, when Lottie was specially pale or weary, they seemed to overshadow her face; but she was neither weary nor pale at this particular moment. She was in great excitement, on the contrary, and flushed with expectation. Though she was only the daughter of a poor Chevalier, Lottie had advantages which separated her from the rest of that little company. Her father was of good family, a point on which she insisted strenuously; and she herself was the possessor of a beautiful voice. The former particular would not have been of much advantage to her, for what was the Despard's old and faded quality to the great people at St. Michael's? But a voice is a different matter; and there had arisen between Miss Huntington and the Chevalier's daughter a kind of intimacy very flattering (the neighbours thought) to Lottie. They had sung together so much and seen so much of each other, that the lodges expected nothing less than that Lottie would have been asked to the wedding, or even—greater honour still!—to be a bridesmaid; and Lottie herself had been wounded and disappointed beyond measure when she found herself left entirely out. But there was still the possibility that the bride might show she had not forgotten her humble friend altogether; and it was for this that Lottie was waiting so anxiously as the time of departure approached. A word, a sign, a wave of the hand surely would be vouchsafed to her as the carriage passed. Her heart was beating loudly as she leant out—a pretty sight to see from without, for the window was framed in luxuriant wreaths of

green, with trailing tendrils of the young delicate leaves which in autumn flamed like scarlet flowers against the wall. The people who were gathering on the road below gave many a look at her. And, though the young ladies from the shops, who had got half-an-hour's leave to see how their handiwork looked in the bride's travelling-dress, were deeply sensible of the fact that a poor Chevalier's daughter was not much richer than themselves, yet they could not help looking and envying Lottie, if only for the window at which she could sit in comfort and see everything that went on, instead of standing in the sun as they had to do. They forgot her, however, and everything else as the carriage drove up to the Deanery to take the bridal pair away. The Dean's daughter was so much the princess of the community that a compromise had been made between popularity and decorum; and it was in a carriage partially open, that an admiring people might behold her as she passed, that she was to drive away. There was the usual long waiting at the door while the farewells were made, during which time the outside world looked on respectfully; and then, with a crowd of "good-byes" thrown after her, and a few—but only a very few, for the Deanery was nothing if not decorous—white satin slippers, and a prance and dash of the impatient horses, and a flourish of the coachman's whip, and a parting gleam of the wedding favour on his breast, the bridal pair rolled rapidly past, and all was over. How quickly they went, everybody said, and how well she looked; and how well that brown dress looked, though it had been thought rather dowdy for such an occasion; and the feather in the hat, how well it matched, about which there had been so much trouble! Some, who had the time, paused to see the wedding guests disperse, and catch other beatific glimpses of fine bonnets and gay dresses; but most of the spectators, after this last



and crowning point of the performance, streamed down the slope and out at the great gateway, and were seen no more.

Lottie drew in her head from the window the moment the carriage passed. She grew red when other people grew pale, being pale by nature; and her face was crimson as she withdrew it from the opening, and came in again to the little room in which most of her life was spent. Her lips were closed very tight, her soft forehead contracted; the fire in her blue eyes, gleaming with anger and disappointment, was (most unwillingly) quenched in tears. She clasped her hands together with a vehement clasp. "It would have cost so little to give a look!" she cried; then bit her lips and clenched her hands and stamped her foot upon the floor, in a forlorn but vigorous effort to restrain her tears.

"What does it matter to you?" said a tall young fellow, sufficiently like Lottie to prove himself her brother, who had looked out lazily over her head while the carriage was passing. He had his hands in his pockets and a slouching gait generally, and looked too big for the little room. She had almost pushed against him in her rapid movement, for his movements were never rapid; and he had not had time to take one hand out of his pocket before she flashed round upon him with two red spots on her cheeks and fury in her heart.

"What does it matter? Oh, nothing! nothing!" cried Lottie. "Why should anything matter? It only shows me a little more, a very little more, how cold the world is, and that nobody has a heart!"

"Few people have very much, I suppose," said the young man; "at least, so the governor says. But what good or harm could it do

you to have a parting sign from *her*? I knew she would never give it you. I knew she would be thinking of nobody but herself——”

“What did you know about it?” cried the girl. “You were never a friend of hers! you were never begged and prayed to go and sing at the Deanery! she never came down the Abbey Hill to look for you! But me she has done all that for; and when I thought just for once she would let everybody see that Lottie Despard was a friend—Oh, Law, for the love of Heaven, go and work at something, and don’t stand there staring at me!”

“What am I to work at?” said the young man, with a yawn. “It’s past working hours; besides, in summer how can anyone work? I can’t make head nor tail of that Euclid when the sun is shining.”

“But when the sun is not shining, Law?”

“Oh! then,” said the youth, with a smile breaking over his somewhat cloudy face, “I can make out the head, but not the tail, and the sting is in the tail, you know! Good-bye, Lottie, and never mind any mother’s daughter of them. They cannot make us anything but what we are, whatever they may do.”

“And what are we?” said Lottie to herself, as her brother strolled lazily out. There was more air to breathe when he was gone, which was something. She sat down upon the little old faded sofa, and shed a few more bitter tears of disappointment and mortification. We all like to think well of ourselves when that is possible; to think well of our belongings, our people, our position in the world—all that makes up that external idea of us which we make acquaintance with years before we know our own real being. No one can tell what the atmosphere of well-being, of external credit, and public esteem is to a child; and this Lottie had never

known. They had been poor, but poverty is no hindrance to that feeling of harmony with the world around which is the higher soul of respectability. But there had not been much about the Despard to respect. The father had been a good officer in his day, and, if he had not been without money and interest, and everything that could help him on, might have been distinguished in his profession. But those were the days of "purchase," and Captain Despard had remained Captain Despard, and had bitterly resented the fact. His wife, too, though she was Lottie's mother, had not been of a kind to reclaim for her husband the failing credit of his life. They had lived as most poor officers on half pay, with pretensions to gentility and hankerings after pleasure, do live. They were in debt all round, as need not be said; and Mrs. Despard's life would have been rendered miserable by it if she had not escaped from the contemplation by means of every cheap merry-making or possible extravagance she could attain to. All had been huggermugger in Lottie's early life; a life not destitute of amusements, indeed, but full of bitterness, small mortifications, snubs, and the cold shoulder of social contempt. Lottie herself had heard in childish quarrels, through the frank recriminations of her childish companions, the frankest statements of what other people thought of her parents; and this had opened her baby eyes prematurely to the facts of the case. It must be supposed that there was some respectable grandpapa, some precise and orderly aunt in the Despard kindred, who had given to Lottie a nature so different from that of her immediate progenitors. As she grew older everything about her had looked to Lottie as the fairy splendour looked in the eyes of the disenchanted human spectator. Her mother's gay dresses, which she once thought so pretty, came to look like the miserable finery they were; her mother's gaiety had become noise and excitement. Her father's grand air grew the poorest false pretension; for must

he not know, Lottie thought, how everybody spoke of him, how little anyone thought of his assumption? And the house was miserable, dirty, disorderly, mean, and gaudy, full of riot and waste and want and poverty—one day a feast, another nothing. Even careless Law—the big boy who was too much at home, who was scarcely ever at school, and who often had no clothes to go out in—even Law saw how wretched it was at home, though he was hopeless as well as careless, and asked his sister what was the good of minding, what could they do? But Lottie was not of the kind which can let ill alone, or well either, for that matter. She did mind; and as she grew older, every week, every day, added to the flame of impatience in her. Just, however, when ruin seemed coming beyond the possibility of further staving-off, Mrs. Despard fell ill and died; and Lottie at sixteen was left alone, miserable, with remorseful thoughts of having secretly blamed the mother who was now out of reach, and to whom she could never make amends for those injurious secret fault-findings; and full of anxieties unspeakable—forlorn wonderings what she was to do, and eagerness to do something. Her grief, however, was lightened by the feeling that now she had everything in her hands and could “make a change,”—even when it was made more heavy by the thought that she had found fault in her heart with the mother who was dead. It seemed to the girl that she must be able, by dint of devoting herself to it, to change everything—to keep the house in order if she did it with her own hands, to pay the bills, wherever the money came from. She was overflowing with life and energy and activity, and disapproved of all the ways of the past. She was like a new king coming to the throne, a new ministry of idealists bent upon undoing all their predecessors had done, and doing everything as it ought to be done. Alas, poor Lottie! the young king with all the stiff precedents of a hundred years against him, the

young ministry confronted by a thousand problems, and finding their ideal pronounced impracticable on every side, were nothing to the heaven-born reformer of the household with a pleasure loving impecunious father to whom debt was second nature, and who had always preferred fun to respectability. And she dashed at her reforms too boldly, as was natural to her age, insisting upon brushings and sweepings till Betty threw up her situation, and asking for money till her father swore at her. "It is to pay the bills, papa! I want to pay the bills!" she had said, reduced to plead for that which she thought she had a right to demand. "D—— the bills!" was all Captain Despard replied.

And even Law, when Lottie tried to order him off to school, was unmanageable. He was no reformer like his sister, but on the whole preferred going just when it suited him and lounging at home between whiles. To be sure home was less amusing now that poor mammy, as they called her, was gone. Her laughter and her complaints, and her odd visitors, and all her slipshod ways, had kept noise and movement, if nothing more, about the house. The tawdry women and the shabby men who had been her friends were all afraid of the dulness which naturally follows a death in the family. Some of these women, indeed, had come to Lottie all tears and kisses, offering to stay with her, and asking what they could do; but their sympathy did not comfort the girl, who even in her deepest grief was all tingling with plans and desires to be doing, and an eager activity and impatience to make the changes she wished. But they fluttered away, every one, when the first excitement was over and the dulness that is inevitable fell upon the house. To do them justice there was not one among them who would not have come daily to "sit with" Lottie, to comfort her with all the news that was going, and tell her that she must not mope.

But Lottie wanted none of their consolations, and did not miss her mother's friends when they abandoned her. She did not miss them, but Law did. Yet he would not go to school; he sat and made faces at her when she ordered and scolded him. "If I didn't do what *she* told me, do you think I will do what you tell me?" said Law; and then Lottie wept and prayed. "What will become of you, Law? what will you ever be good for? Papa has no money to leave us, and you will not be able to do anything."

"Who said I wanted to do anything?" said Law flippantly; and then, "who said I should not be able to do anything?" he added, with offence. "I can pick it up whenever I like." But Lottie, preternaturally, awfully wise, feeling the burden of the world upon her shoulders, knew that he could not pick it up when he pleased. She knew that education had to be acquired painfully, not sipped a little mouthful at a time. She had never had any education herself, but yet she knew this, as she knew so many things, by instinct, by constant critical observation of the habits which she disapproved. There are few more vigorously successful ways of finding out what is right, than by living among people whom we feel indignantly to be wrong.

"You may think what you like," she said, "Law—but I *know* that you cannot learn anything in that way. Three days at home and one at school! I wonder they let you go at all. I wonder they don't turn you out. I wonder they did not turn you out long ago!"

"And that is just what they are always threatening to do," said Law laughing; "but they have not the heart of a mouse, the fellows at the grammar-school. And they'll never do it, though I shouldn't mind. I should be free then, and never have to trouble my head about anything at all."

“You’ll have to trouble your head when you have to work and don’t know how,” said Lottie. “Oh, if I was a boy! It’s no use wishing, I am only a girl; and you are a great lump, neither one nor the other; but if I were only a boy, and could get something to do, and a little money to pay those bills——”

“Oh, dash the bills, as papa says. He doesn’t say ‘dash,’” said Law, with provoking calm; “but, then, I mustn’t swear.”

“Oh, Law, I should like to beat you!” said Lottie, clenching her little fists in impotent anger and setting her teeth. But Law only laughed the more.

“You had better not,” he said, when he had got over his laugh, “for I am a deal stronger than you.”

And so he was, and so were they all, much stronger than poor Lottie; even Betty, who would not scrub, but who was too well used to all the ways of the family and aware of all their troubles, to be sent away. She fought for a time hard and bitterly, striving with all her might to clean, and to dust, and to keep things straight, to the infinite discontent of everybody concerned. But yet perhaps the girl’s struggles were not utterly without use; for when the next astonishing change came in their lives, and their little income was suddenly increased by half, and a removal made necessary, Captain Despard, of his own accord, turned Lottie’s despair in a moment into hope and joy. He said, “Now, Lottie, you shall have things your own way. Now you shall see what you can do. This is a new start for us all. If you can keep us respectable, by Jove, you shall, and nobody shall stop you. A man ought to be respectable when he’s made a Chevalier of St. Michael.” Lottie’s heart leaped up, up from where it lay fathoms deep in unutterable depression

and discouragement. “Oh, papa, papa, do you mean it? Will you keep your word?” she cried, happy yet dubious; and how he kept it, but with a difference, and how they set out upon this new chapter in their career, shall be told before we come back again to Lottie in her proper person, in the little drawing room in the Chevaliers’ quarters within the Abbey precincts, on Miss Huntington’s wedding-day.



## CHAPTER II.

### THE CHEVALIERS' LODGES.

THE name of a Chevalier of St. Michael sounds very splendid to innocent and uninstructed ears. It is a title which stands alone in England at least. Poor Knights have been heard of both in flesh and blood and in confectionery, in other places; but the title Chevalier is preserved in St. Michael's, and there alone. Lottie thought it very imposing, and her heart leaped, partly with a sense of her own injustice all her life to her father, of whose merits, in youthful irreverence, she had hitherto thought but little. He must be, she thought involuntarily, a great deal braver, better, and altogether of more importance than she had supposed, when his qualities could win him such a distinction from his country; for that it was a distinction accorded by the country Lottie had no manner of doubt in those days. She was overawed and overjoyed: first of all on account of the people in Fairford, where they had hitherto lived, and who had shown but little respect for the family: but much more on her own account. She felt reconciled to herself, to her kind, to all her circumstances, when she reflected that she was the daughter of a Chevalier of St. Michael, and that Betty would never leave Fairford, and that Captain Despard had expressed himself in favour of respectability as a thing to be cultivated. Life suddenly took a new aspect to her. She thought they would be able to shake off every incumbrance when they went away. Her father would henceforward live a stately and dignified life as became his position. He would not haunt the place where billiards were played, and wear a number of shabby coats, each worse than the other, but every one with a flower in it. The flower, which most people

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