

**AN OPEN VERDICT**  
**VOL. I.**

By  
Mary Elizabeth Braddon

# **Table of Contents**

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XV.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHAPTER XVIII.

**AN OPEN VERDICT.**

# CHAPTER I.

## MRS. DULCIMER HAS HER VIEWS.

'SIR KENRICK would be a splendid match for her', said the Vicar's wife.

'As poor as Job, and as proud as Lucifer,' retorted the Vicar, without lifting his eyes from a volume of his favourite Bishop Berkeley.

It was the Vicar's way in these *tête-à-tête* conversations by the domestic hearth. He read, and his wife talked to him. He could keep his attention on the most intricate chain of argument, and yet never answer Mrs. Dulcimer's speculative assertions or vague questionings away from the purpose. This was the happy result of long habit. The Vicar loved his books, and his wife loved the exercise of her tongue. His morning hours were sacred. He studied or read as he pleased till dinner-time, secure from feminine interruption. But the evening was a privileged time for Mrs. Dulcimer. She brought a big workbasket, like an inverted beehive, into the library directly after dinner, and established herself in the arm-chair opposite the Vicar's, ready for a comfortable chat. A comfortable chat meant a vivacious monologue, with an occasional remark from Mr. Dulcimer, who came in now and then like a chorus. He had his open book on the reading easel attached to his chair, and turned the leaves with a languid air, sometimes as if out of mere absence of mind; but he was deep in philosophy, or metaphysics, or theology, or antiquarianism, for the greater

part of his time; and his inward ear was listening to the mystic voices of the dead, while his outward ear gave respectful attention to Mrs. Dulcimer's critical observations upon the living.

'As poor as Job, and as proud as Lucifer,' repeated the Vicar, with his eye upon a stiffish passage in Berkeley.

'I call it a proper pride,' said Mrs. Dulcimer. 'And as for poverty, she would have money enough for both. And then he has the estate.'

'Mortgaged up to the hilt.'

'And the title.'

'Now do you really believe, Selina, that those three letters of the alphabet, S I R, prefixed to a man's name, can give him the smallest possible distinction in the estimate of any of his fellow-creatures not lunatic?'

'What is the use of talking in that high and mighty way, Clement? I know that Mary Turner, an insignificant little thing with red hair and a speckly skin, who was at school with me at the Misses Turk's, at Great Yafford, was very much looked up to by all the girls because her uncle was a baronet. He lived a long way off, and he never took any notice of her, that we could find out; but he was a baronet, and we all felt as if there was a difference in her on that account. I don't pretend to say that we were not very ridiculous for thinking so, but still you know a school is only the world in little—and the world sets a high value on titles. I should like to see Beatrix mistress of Culverhouse Castle.'

'Her father's money would be convenient for paying off the mortgages, no doubt, provided Mr. Harefield approved of the marriage. Rather a difficult old gentleman, I fancy.'

'Difficult!' cried Mrs. Dulcimer; 'he's detestable! a wicked old tyrant. If it were not for our friendship Beatrix's life would be unendurable.'

'Do you really think we are any good to her?' inquired the Vicar, in his dreamily uncertain way, as of a man who was too doubtful about the groundwork of existence to feel any certainty about its minor details.

This was his Bishop Berkeley mood, his mind varying in hue and tone according to the book he was reading. Just now he felt that mind was paramount over matter, and was hardly disposed to interest himself warmly in a young woman who might have no existence except in his own idea of her.

'My dear, our house is the only notion of home the poor child has,—the only place where she meets pleasant people, or hears and sees pleasant things. How can we fail to improve and develop her? I am sure, without egotism, I may say that I have been a God-send to that motherless girl. Think how *farouche* she was when she first came to us.'

'Yes, she was a wild, untamed kind of creature,' assented the Vicar. 'Beautiful as a portrait by Rembrandt though, with that tawny skin of hers. I call her *la belle sauvage*. She always reminds me of Pocahontas.'

'Now wouldn't it be a blessing, Clement, if we could see her well married—married to a man of position, you know—and

an honourable-minded man, like Kenrick? You know you always said he was honourable. You could always believe him.'

'True, my love. Kenrick had his good qualities. He was not a lad that my heart ever warmed to, but I believe he did his work honestly, and he never told me a lie.'

'Then don't you think,' urged the enthusiastic Selina, 'that he would make Beatrix Harefield an excellent husband?'

'My dear,' said the Vicar, gravely, 'you are the best natured of women; but I am afraid you do a great deal of harm.'

'Clement!'

'Yes, my love. Good-nature in the abstract is undoubtedly beautiful; but an active good-nature, always on the alert to do some service to its fellow-creatures, is of all attributes the most dangerous. Even the attempt of this good man, Bishop Berkeley, to found a college in the Bermudas resulted in waste of time and money. He would have done better had he stayed at his Irish Deanery. The man who does least harm in the world is your calmly selfish person who goes through life by the narrow path of a rational self-indulgence, and never turns aside to benefit or interfere with the rest of the human race.'

'One of your dreadful paradoxes, Clement. How does that agree with St. Paul's definition of charity?'

'My love, St. Paul's charity is a supremely passive virtue. It suffereth long, is not easily provoked, is not puffed up, thinketh no evil—all which qualities are compatible with strict neutrality as to one's fellow-creatures' affairs.'

‘Suffereth long—and *is kind*, you left that out, Clement.’

‘Kindness there I take to imply a mental state, and not a pushing, exacting benevolence,’ replied the Vicar. ‘Charity poketh not its nose into its neighbour’s business—maketh not matches—busieth not itself with the conduct of other people’s lives—and never doeth any harm. Good-nature does no end of mischief—in a perfectly well-meaning way.’

The Vicar spoke with some soreness. Poor Mrs. Dulcimer’s good-nature, and sometimes misdirected energy, had been getting her into trouble for the last twenty years. Everybody liked her; everybody dreaded and abhorred her good-nature. She had no children of her own, and was always full of good advice for the mothers of her acquaintance. She knew when babies ought to be weaned, and when they were sickening for the measles. She tried to heal family quarrels, and invariably made the breach wider. She loved match-making, but her matches, when brought to the triumphant conclusion of licence or wedding cake, seldom stood the test of a few years’ matrimony. She was so eager to do the best for the young men and women of her acquaintance, that she generally brought ill-assorted people together, taking too broad a view of the fitness of things, on the ground of income, family, age, and such vulgar qualifications, and ignoring those subtle differences which set an eternal mark of separation upon certain members of the human family.

‘I think, Selina, if I were you, I would leave Beatrix to find a husband for herself,’ said the Vicar, stretching out his legs comfortably before the wide hearth. ‘She is young—there is plenty of time. Let her come here as often as she pleases. I like



to see that Rembrandt face of hers. But let things take their own course.

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,

Rough hew them as we will.”

Don’t you think it is almost an impertinence towards that ever active Providence for us poor worms to be always taking one another’s lives under our petty protection, and trying to shape them our way?’

‘Clement!’ exclaimed Mrs. Dulcimer, ruffling her plumes a little. She wore a good deal of lace frilling and muslin puffing about her neck and breast, and these adornments were subject to an occasional agitation, like the feathers of an excited Dorking, or one of the Vicar’s golden-pencilled Hamburgs. ‘Clement,’ cried Mrs. Dulcimer, ‘you have a beautiful temper, but I’m afraid you are selfish.’

The Vicar laid down his book with a smile of satisfaction. He saw the opportunity for a paradox.

‘My love, did you ever know a good-tempered man who wasn’t selfish? or rather, did you ever know a thoroughly selfish person who wasn’t good-tempered? Your wisely selfish man knows his own interest too well to fret and fume about trifles. He knows that, after five-and-twenty years of age, the supreme good in this life is repose, and that he can never enjoy it unless he cultivates an easy temper.’

‘Selfishness is a vice, Clement.’

'That depends upon what we call selfishness. If a strict neutrality as to my neighbour's business means selfishness, assuredly I am the most selfish of men.'

'The Gospel tells us we are to love our neighbour as ourselves, Clement.'

'I obey that divine precept implicitly. I never worry myself. I never worry my neighbour.'

The Vicar might have gone a step further, and said that he liked to feed his neighbour as well as he liked to feed himself—for, in that one quality of caring for the body as well as for the souls of other people, Clement Dulcimer was a faithful follower of his Divine Master.

'And I'm afraid you allow things in your parish that oughtn't to be, Clement, sometimes,' ventured Mrs. Dulcimer.

'My dear, God allows them. They are done under the All-seeing Eye. If He cannot make men better, do you suppose I can?'

'You might lead them to Him, dear.'

'I try my best to do that, Selina; but I don't drive them. That's where I fall short, I admit. Cyril is trying his hand at the driving process. He's young and energetic. We shall see how it answers, and how long he sticks at it.'

'Cyril is the most earnest young man you've ever had as a curate.'

'I taught him myself, and I know what he's made of,' murmured the Vicar.

'And there's no denying that he has done good already, Clement. The schools are better attended, and there are more poor people at church on a Sunday evening.'

'Since you have such a high opinion of Cyril, how is it that you have never thought of him as a husband for Beatrix? A clergyman ought to marry a fortune if he marries at all. He can put the money out to higher interest than any one else. He keeps a deposit account in heaven.'

'But, Clement, the title!' exclaimed Mrs. Dulcimer, 'and Culverhouse Castle. Such a position for dear Beatrix.'

'Ah, to be sure, the position! I suppose a girl thinks more about that now-a-days than of her lover's mind or person. But certainly Cyril is both handsomer and cleverer than his cousin Kenrick. I should like a curate with a large income, it would be so good for the parish. And then we might rub on without the weekly offertory Cyril is always plaguing me to institute, and which I am convinced will set my congregation against me. Fancy me going up to my pulpit as a beggar every Sunday, and my people expecting value for their money out of my sermon. Imagine their remarks at the church door: "Not much there for sixpence," "A very poor shilling's worth," and so forth.'

'Clement,' cried Mrs. Dulcimer, thoroughly scandalized this time, and with all her frills in motion, 'you ought never to have been a clergyman.'

'My love, I freely admit that some easier walk in life might have suited me better. A sub-librarian's place, now, in some antique library, like the Cheetham Institution at Manchester. I should

have had my books round me, and my superior to tell me what to do. No responsibilities, and leisure for self-culture. But if I am a poor creature as a parson, you supplement me so well, Selina, that, between us, I think we do our duty to the parish. That last batch of soup was excellent. I tasted it yesterday at old dame Hardy's. The clear soup we get at Lord Highflyer's state dinners is mere pot-liquor compared with it. Indeed, I think,' pursued the Vicar, dreamily, as if he were meditating a proposition of Berkeley's, 'that all clear soups are more or less a mistake—tasting only of sherry and burnt sugar.'

'Always thinking of temporal blessings, Clement.'

'They are the only blessings we can fully realize while on this side of eternity, my dear. We may be excused if we sometimes set an undue value on them.'

Mrs. Dulcimer sighed, and opened her workbasket. There were little shirts and flannel swathings to be made for new-comers into this world of troubles—heirs apparent to a life of labour, with a reversionary interest in the workhouse. The Vicar's wife spread her piece of linen on the table, and began a series of problems with a parallelogram in stiff brown paper, in order to find out how she might get the maximum of baby-shirts out of the minimum of linen. It vexed her that her husband should take life so lightly, and be troubled about a few things, when she was troubled about so many. She had no doubt that he was in the wrong, and that she and Cyril Culverhouse understood the real meaning of their duties a great deal better than the Vicar.

Clement Dulcimer was the living embodiment of an idea which at this time had not yet been put before the world by Mr. Matthew Arnold. He was all sweetness and light. He believed in culture as the highest good. He lived among his books, and upon his books; and those books were of the best that the elect of this world have written. He sought no happiness beyond his library, save in his garden and poultry yard, which afforded his senses the gratification of colour and sweet scents, sunshine and balmy air. He had travelled little, and sighed but faintly for a pleasure which he found impossible. His books and his poor absorbed all his spare cash. There was none left for foreign travel—so Mr. Dulcimer was content to enjoy Greece in the pages of Thucydides, or Childe Harold—to stand on the threshold of the sacred grove with Antigone—to know Cithæron only on the lips of Ædipus—to see the sandy plain of Marathon, or the walls of Thebes, with his mind's eye alone.

'I dare say I should be disappointed if I saw the reality,' he murmured placidly. 'Realities are so disenchanting. Or I might be taken by brigands, and poor Selina would have to sell her great-grand-father's silver tea-kettle to ransom me.'

The living at Little Yafford was a good one, and the parish was small. It was altogether one of those exceptional cures which are reserved for the more fortunate sons of the Church. Mr. Dulcimer had obtained it while he was still a young man, the living being in the gift of his uncle, Sir Philip Dulcimer, of Hawtree Hall and Yafford Park. Yafford Park was rather a dreary place, with an unwieldy barrack of the Georgian era in the middle of it, and Sir Philip had been very glad to grant a large lease of park and mansion to Mr. Piper, the Great Yafford

cotton-spinner, who spent a great deal more money in little Yafford than Sir Philip would have done, but who was looked down upon by his neighbours on principle. Great Yafford, the manufacturing town five miles off, was as Radical a place as you would care to find, but Little Yafford was essentially aristocratic, ignored the commercial element altogether, and thought it an affliction to be so near the tall chimney shafts of the busy town.

Little Yafford had perhaps some right to give itself airs, on the strength of being one of the prettiest villages in Yorkshire. It was like a spoiled beauty, and felt that nothing could be too good for it. Great bleak hills rose up between it and the bitter east winds, a river wound in and out of the village like a shining serpent, and licked its green meadows and garden boundaries. The long low stone bridge was as old as the Romans. There was not an ugly house in the place—except that big barrack of Sir Philip's, and that was hidden behind the fine old elms and oaks of the park. There was not a neglected garden, or an objectionable pigsty. The gentry were all well-to-do people, who bestowed money and care upon the beautification of their homes; while the poorer parishioners were under the influence of Mr. Dulcimer's sweetness and light, and Mrs. Dulcimer's active good-nature, and laboured industriously to make their cottages lovely.

To come from stony, noisy, smoky, crowded Great Yafford to pastoral Little Yafford, was like coming from purgatory to paradise—an earthly paradise of rustic beauty and placid repose, content, and harmony. Yet Mr. Dulcimer's last new curate, Cyril Culverhouse, breathed many a thoughtful sigh

over the ignorances and even vice which he discovered in this smiling village. Coming out of some cottage door, over which the roses and honeysuckle hung in unpruned luxuriance, his lips would often involuntarily ejaculate the familiar words of the evening collect—‘Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord.’

## CHAPTER II.

### SWORD AND GOWN.

AT various periods of his tranquil career the Rev. Clement Dulcimer had found it convenient to add to his income by taking a private pupil or two. He could not have endured what he called a herd of young men, meaning half a dozen, but he rather liked to have a couple of intelligent young fellows following him about through the dawdling progress of his out-of-door life, or hanging upon his words in the comfortable quietude of his study. He was an excellent master for classics and theology—mathematics he frankly abhorred—and he taught conscientiously in his own unconventional way. The men he coached generally came out well; but in after life there was a tinge of eccentricity in them—a strain imparted by Clement Dulcimer unawares—and which in one or two cases took the unhappy form of latitudinarianism. Spinoza on the brain, some people called it.

The two pupils who had stayed longest at the Vicarage, and occupied the most important position in the minds of the Vicar and his wife, were Kenrick Culverhouse and his first cousin Cyril. Old Sir Kenrick and the Vicar had been at Oxford together, and it seemed the most natural thing that the baronet should send his only son and his orphan nephew to his old chum, more especially as he could nowhere else educate them so well or so cheaply. Culverhouse Castle was a fine historical place in Hampshire, which tourists went out of their way to see, but



which the late Sir Kenrick did not regard with any enthusiasm. He had been more or less under a cloud of money difficulties ever since he could remember, and preferred lodgings in St. James's to his feudal birthplace. The moat was all very well, and so was the massive old keep, on the top of which the gardener had made a kitchen-garden for gooseberries and strawberry beds; but Sir Kenrick liked Jermyn Street and the clubs a great deal better; and, if a man must have a castle, the King's Bench, in which he had spent some of the liveliest days of his youth, was much pleasanter to his mind than Culverhouse. Lady Culverhouse was fond of the castle, no doubt—or at any rate she stayed there, and it was a tradition in the family that no other air suited her, and that she was quite rooted to the spot; a tradition which was all the more firmly established because nobody had ever proposed taking her anywhere else. Old Sir Kenrick and his wife had gone to join the family ashes in the vault under Culverhouse Church, and young Sir Kenrick reigned in his father's stead. All the quicksilver in the Culverhouse veins seemed to have run out with the last baronet. Young Kenrick was steady and thoughtful, and the mortgages weighed upon his spirits like a nightmare. He was always thinking what the estate would be if those mortgages could but be paid off.

It seemed to him an Eldorado. But there were only he and his cousin and heir presumptive to accomplish this great work. And how were two young men, moderately gifted, to earn fifty thousand pounds between them?

'Unless one of us were to break out into a Walter Scott, or discover a new motive power to supersede steam, I don't see

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

