

**THE MYSTERY of
BLENCARROW**

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CHAPTER I.

THE BLENCARROW HOUSEHOLD.

THE house of Blencarrow, which, without being one of the great houses of the county, was as comfortable and handsome as a country gentleman not exactly of the highest importance could desire, stood in a pretty little park of its own, by the side of a bright little mountain river, either in Cumberland or Westmoreland or North Lancashire—for the boundaries of these counties are to me somewhat confused, and I cannot aver where one ends and another begins. It was built, as is not unusual in North-country houses, on the slope of a hill, so that the principal rooms, which were on a level with the great entrance, were on the other side elevated by at least one lofty story from the flower-garden which surrounded the house. The windows of the drawing-room commanded thus a delightful view over a finely diversified country, ending in the far distance in a glimpse of water with a range of blue hills behind, which was one of the great lakes of that beautiful district. When sun or moon caught this distant lake, which it did periodically at certain times of the day and night, according to the season, it flashed suddenly into life, like one of those new signals of science by which the sun himself is made to interpret between man and man. In the foreground the trees of the park clustered over the glimpses of the lively North-country river, which, sometimes shallow and showing all its pebbles, some times deepening into a pool, ran cheerfully by towards the lake. To the right, scarcely visible save when the trees were bare in winter, the red roofs of the little post-town, a mile and a half away, appeared in the distance with a pleasant sense of neighbourhood. But the scenery, after all, was not so interesting as the people inside.

They were, however, a very innocent, very simple, and unexciting group of country people. Mrs. Blencarrow had been a widow for five or six years, having lived there for some dozen years before, the most beloved of wives. She was not a native of the district, but had come from the South, a beautiful girl, to whom her husband, who was a plain gentleman of simple character and manners, could never be sufficiently grateful for having married him. The ladies of the district thought this sentiment exaggerated, but everybody acknowledged that Mrs. Blencarrow made him an excellent wife. When he died he had left everything in her hands—the entire guardianship of the children, untrammelled by any joint authority save that of her own brothers, whose names were put in the will as a matter of form, and without any idea that they would ever take upon them to interfere. There were five children, the eldest of whom was a slim girl of sixteen, very gentle and quiet, and not very strong; two boys of fourteen and twelve, at school; and two little ones, aged eight and nine respectively. They lived a very pleasant, well-cared-for, happy life. Mrs. Blencarrow's means, if not very large, were comfortable enough. The house was handsomely *montée*, the children had everything they could desire; the gloom of her first widowhood had been over for some time, and she 'saw her friends' like any other lady in the county, giving very pleasant dinner-parties, and even dances when the boys were at home for their holidays—dances, perhaps, all the more gay and easy because the children had a large share in them, and a gentle license prevailed—the freedom of innocence and extreme youth.

It is not to be supposed, when I say this, that anything which could in the remotest degree be called 'fast' was in these assemblies. Indeed, the very word had not been invented in those days, and Mrs. Blencarrow was herself an impersonation of

womanly dignity. The country-people were even a little afraid of her, if truth must be told. Without being stiff or prudish, there was a little air she had, at the faintest shade of impropriety, which scared an offender more than denunciation. She had a determined objection to scandal, even to gossip, and looked coldly upon flirtation, which was not then a recognised pastime as it is now. Nothing ever filled the neighbours with greater consternation than when a passing visitor from London, seeing Mrs. Blencarrow for the first time, declared that she was a woman who looked as if she had a history.

A history! When people say that, they do not mean anything noble or saintly; what it means is scandal, something that has been talked about. There was a general cry, which overwhelmed the unwary stranger. Mrs. Blencarrow a history! Yes, the very best history a woman can have—the record of a blameless life.

‘Nevertheless,’ said the unfortunate man, ‘there is something in her eyes——’

‘Oh yes, there is everything that is good in her eyes,’ said Lady Tremayne, who was young and enthusiastic, a sentiment in which most of the others agreed. At a later period, however, Mrs. Bircham, of The Leas, shook her head a little and said, ‘Now that one thinks of it, there is something curious in Mrs. Blencarrow’s eyes.’

‘They are very fine eyes, if that is what you mean.’

‘No; that is not what I mean. She looks you too full in the face with them, as if she were defying you to find out anything wrong about her. Now, when there is nothing wrong to find out, a woman has no occasion to defy you.’

‘It must be a strange kind of wrong that has not been found out in eighteen years.’

‘Well, it might have happened before she was married—before she came here at all; and when you know that there is something, however long the time may be, you never can forget it, don’t you know,’ said Mrs. Bircham, shaking her head.

‘You seem to speak from experience, my dear,’ said her husband.

‘No; I don’t speak from experience,’ cried the lady, growing red; ‘but I have seen a great many things in my time. I have seen so many fine reputations collapse, and so many people pulled down from their pedestals.’

‘And helped to do it, perhaps,’ said Lady Tremayne. But she made the observation in an aside, for no one liked to encounter Mrs. Bircham’s enmity and power of speech. She was one of those people who can develop a great matter from a small one, and smell out a piece of gossip at any distance; and a seed of this description sown in her mind never died. She was not, as it happened, particularly happy in her surroundings. Though she was irreproachable herself, there was no lack of histories in the Bircham family, and Kitty, her second daughter, was one of the little flirts whose proceedings Mrs. Blencarrow so much disapproved. Mrs. Bircham was often herself very angry with Kitty, but by a common maternal instinct could not endure to hear from another any echo of the same reproof which she administered freely.

Mrs. Blencarrow was, however, entirely unaware of this arrow shot into the air. She was still, though approaching forty, as

handsome as at any period of her career, with all the additional charms of experience and understanding added to the still unbroken perfection of her features and figure. She was tall and pale, with large gray eyes, singularly clear and lustrous, which met every gaze with a full look, sometimes very imposing, and which always conveyed an impression of pride and reserve in the midst of their full and brave response to every questioning eye. Mrs. Bircham, who was not without discrimination, had indeed made a very fair hit in her description of her neighbour's look. Sometimes those proud and steadfast eyes would be overbearing—haughty in their putting down of every impertinent glance. She had little colour habitually, but was subject to sudden flushes whenever her mind or feelings were affected, which wonderfully changed the character of her face, and came and went like the wind. She dressed always with a rich sobriety, in black or subdued colours—tones of violet and gray—never quite forgetting her widowhood, her friends thought, though always cheerful, as a woman with a family of children is bound for their sakes to be. She was an excellent woman of business, managing her estate with the aid of a sort of half-steward, half-agent, a young man brought up by her husband and specially commended to her by his dying lips. People said, when they discussed Mrs. Blencarrow's affairs, as the affairs of women and widows are always discussed, that it would have been better for her to have had a more experienced and better instructed man as steward, who would have taken the work entirely off her hands—for young Brown was not at all a person of education; but her devotion to her husband's recommendation was such that she would hear of no change. And the young fellow on his side was so completely devoted to the family, so grateful for all that had been done for him, so absolutely trustworthy, that the wisest concluded on the whole that she was doing the best for her

son's interests in keeping Brown, who lived in the house, but in quite an humble way—one of the wisest points in Mrs. Blencarrow's treatment of him being that she never attempted to bring him out of his own sphere.

Besides Brown, her household included a governess, Miss Trimmer, who bore most appropriately that old-fashioned educational name; and an old housekeeper, who had been there in the time of Mrs. Blencarrow's mother-in-law, and who had seen her late master born—an old lady always in a brown silk dress, who conferred additional respectability on the household, and who was immensely considered and believed in. She came next to their mother in the affections of all the children. It was a very harmonious, well-ordered house, ringing with pleasant noise and nonsense when the boys came home, quiet at other times, though never quite without the happy sound of children, save when the two little ones, Minnie and Jimmy, were out of the way. As for Emmy, the eldest, she was so quiet that scarcely any sound of her ever came into the house.

Such was the house of Blencarrow on a certain Christmas when the boys had come home as usual for their holidays. They came back in the highest spirits, determined that this should be the jolliest Christmas that ever was. The word 'jolly,' as applied to everything that is pleasant, had just come into use at school—I doubt even whether it had progressed into 'awfully jolly.' It sounded still very piquant in the ears of the youngsters, and still was reprov'd ('Don't be always using that dreadful word!') by mothers; the girls were still shy of using it at all. It was Reginald who declared it to be the jolliest Christmas that ever had been. The weather was mild and open, good for hunting, and the boys had some excellent runs; though all idea of frost and skating had to be

given up. They were pleased with their own prowess and with everybody and everything round them, and prepared to act their part with grace and *bonhomie*—Reginald as master of the house, Bertie as his lieutenant and henchman—at the great ball which was to be given at Blencarrow on Christmas Eve.

The house was quite full for this great ceremonial. At Christmas the mixture of babes and grown-up young ladies and gentlemen is more easily made than at any other time of the year. The children mustered very strong. Those who were too far off to drive home that evening were with their parents staying at Blencarrow, and every available corner was filled. The house was illuminated all over; every passage and every sitting-room open to the bands of invaders—the little ones who played and the older ones who flirted—and the company was in the fullest tide of enjoyment, when the little incident occurred which I am about to record.

Mrs. Blencarrow had never looked better in her life. She wore a new gray velvet dress, long and sweeping, without any of the furbelows of the time, which would not have suited the heavy material nor her own admirable figure. It was open a little at the throat, with beautiful lace surrounding the fine warm whiteness. Her hair was worn higher than was usual at the time, in a fashion of her own, and fastened with diamond stars. The children were very proud of their mother. She was like a lady out of a book, said Emmy, who was a romantic girl. Reginald felt himself more grand than words can say when he stood up beside her at the door to receive the guests. Her eyes were something like her diamonds—full of light; and she met every glance more proudly than ever, with that direct look which some people thought so candid and open, and Mrs. Bircham believed to be a defiance to all the world

to find out something that was not right. There was nothing, certainly, to find out in that open house, where every stranger might penetrate into every corner and welcome. Mrs. Blencarrow was a little pale, but now and then her countenance would be covered by one of those sudden flushes of emotion which made her radiant. She put one hand on Reginald's shoulder with a proud gesture, as though he were supporting her as she stood at the door welcoming everybody; and the boy drew himself up to his fullest height, trying to look twenty. He shook hands with everyone in the most anxious, hospitable way. Never was the part of master of the house more thoroughly played; and thus, with every expectation of pleasure, the ball began.

CHAPTER II.

'IS IT YOU?'

KITTY BIRCHAM had been a flirt almost from the time she could speak; but even to a flirt Fate sometimes comes in the midst of her frivolity, as well as to the simplest girl. She had played with so many hearts without being the worse for it, that it was the greatest surprise to herself, as well as to her mother and interested friends, to find that at last this little witch was herself caught. I need not say that the man was the last person whom, in her sober senses, Kitty would have chosen, or any of her family consented to. Man! He was not even a man, but a boy—only two or three years older than herself—a young fellow who had to go through one of those ordeals, quite new-fangled then—things which nobody understood—an examination for an appointment; and who had nothing in the world but the prospect of that, a prospect daily becoming less probable since he and she had fallen in love with each other. They were neither of them of that high strain which is stimulated by love. They had not force of mind to think that every day which was spent in love-making, quarrelling and folly made it less easy for Walter Lawrence to work the next, or to work at all; and that without work he was as little likely to pass his examination as to fly; and that if he did not pass that examination they could not marry.

Both of these young fools knew all this perfectly well, but the knowledge made no difference in their behaviour. When he was not running after her by his own impulse, which was generally the case, Kitty used all her wiles to draw him away from his books, sending him notes, making appointments, inventing ways and

means of meeting. His mother made appeals to him with tears in her eyes, and almost cursed the girl who was making her boy lose all his chances; and *her* mother made Kitty's life a burden, asking her how she intended to live, and whether she meant to support her husband by her needlework (at which everybody knew she was so clever!), by taking in washing, or by what?—since he neither had a penny nor would ever be able to make one for himself. This discipline on both sides naturally threw these foolish young people more and more into each other's arms, and the domestic discomforts became so great that it at last became apparent to both that there was nothing for it but to run away.

‘When we are married they will see that it is no use making a fuss,’ Walter said to Kitty. ‘They will acknowledge that once it is done it can't be undone.’

‘And they *must* lay their heads together and get you a post, or give us something to live on,’ said Kitty to Walter.

‘They will never let us starve,’ said he ‘after.’

‘And they will never give us any peace,’ said she, ‘before.’

So that they were in perfect accord so far as the theory went. But they hesitated to take that tremendous step; their minds were made up, and it was a delicious subject of conversation during the hours which they daily spent together; but neither of them as yet had quite screwed up courage to the sticking-point.

This was the state of affairs on the evening of the Blencarrow ball. It had happened to both to be unusually tried during that day. Kitty had been scolded by her mother till she did not know, as she said, ‘whether she was standing on her head or her heels.’ Her

uncle, who had come from a distant part of the country for Christmas, had been invited to remonstrate with her on her folly. Papa had not said anything, but he had been so snappish that she had not known what to do to please him—papa, who usually stood by her under all circumstances. And Uncle John! Kitty felt that she could not bear such another day. Walter, on his side, had again had a scene with his mother, who had threatened to speak to her trustees, that they might speak to Walter to show him his duty, since he would not listen to her.

It was some time before this suffering pair could get within reach of each other to pour out their several complaints. Kitty had first to dance with half a dozen uninteresting people, and to be brought back demurely to Mrs. Bircham's side at the end of every tedious dance; and Walter had to ask a corresponding number of young ladies before a happy chance brought them together out of sight of Mrs. Bircham and Mrs. Lawrence, who were both watching with the most anxious eyes. Kitty could not even lose time dancing when they had thus met.

'Oh, I have a dozen things to tell you!' she said; 'I must tell you, or I shall die.'

They went into the conservatory, but there were some people there, and into room after room, without finding a solitary corner. It was in the hall that the dance was going on. The servants were preparing the supper-table in the dining-room. The library was being used by the elder people (horrid elder people, always getting in one's way, who had no feeling at all!) for their horrid cards. The morning-room was given up to tea. People, *i.e.*, other young pairs, were seated on the stairs and in every available corner.

‘Oh, come down here; there is nobody here,’ said Kitty, drawing her lover to the staircase at the end of a long passage which led down to the lower part of the house.

Both of them knew the house thoroughly, as country neighbours do. They had been all over it when they were children, and knew the way down into the flower-garden, and even the private door at the back, by which tenants and petitioners were admitted to Mrs. Blencarrow’s business-room. The lights were dim in these deserted regions; there was perfect silence and quiet—no other couples to push against, no spying servants nor reproachful seniors. The young pair hurried down the long stairs, feeling the cold of the empty passage grateful and pleasant.

‘The old dining-room is the nicest place,’ said Kitty, leading the way. This room was in the front of the house under the drawing-room, and looked out upon the lawn and flower-beds. It was part of the older house, which had served all the purposes of the Blencarrows in the days when people had not so many wants as now. There was no light in it except a faint glimmer from the fire. The shutters had not been closed, and the moon looked in through the branches of the leafless trees. The two lovers went in with a rush and sat down with quiet satisfaction upon a sofa just within the door.

‘Nobody will disturb us here,’ whispered Kitty with a sigh of satisfaction. ‘We can stay as long as we like here.’

They were both out of breath from their rush; and to find themselves alone in the dark, and in a place where they had no right to be, was delightful. They sat quiet for a moment, leaning against each other recovering their breath, and then there happened

something which, notwithstanding Kitty's intense preoccupation with her own affairs, gave her such a prick of still more vivid curiosity as roused every sense and faculty in her. She became all ear and all observation in a moment. There was a soft sound as of a door opening on the other side of the room—the side that was in the shade—and then after a moment a voice asked, 'Is it you?'

Walter (the idiot) suppressed with pain a giggle, and only suppressed it because Kitty flung herself upon him, putting one hand upon his mouth and clutching his coat with the other to keep him quiet. She held her breath and became noiseless as a mouse—as a kitten in the moment before a spring. The voice was a man's voice, with something threatening in its tone.

'How long do you think this is going to last?' he said.

Oh, what a foolish thing a boy is! Walter shook with laughter, while she listened as if for life and death.

Then there was a pause. Again the voice asked anxiously, 'Is it you?'—another pause, and then the soft closing of the door more cautiously than it had been opened.

Walter rose up from the sofa as soon as the door was shut. 'I must get my laugh out,' he whispered, sweeping Kitty out into the passage. Oh, that foolish, foolish boy! As if it were a laughing matter! A man, a stranger, asking somebody how long 'this' was to last! How long what was to last? And who could he be?

'Oh, Wat, you might have stayed a moment!' Kitty said, exasperated; 'you might have kept quiet! Perhaps he would have said something more. Who could he be?'

‘It is no business of ours,’ said Walter; ‘one of the servants, I suppose. Let’s go upstairs again, Kitty. We have no business here.’

‘Oh, don’t be so silly,’ cried Kitty; ‘we must find a quiet place, for I’ve scores of things to tell you. There is a room at the other end with a light in it. Let us go there.’

Their footsteps sounded upon the stone passage, and Kitty’s dress rustled—there could be no eavesdropping possible there. She went on a step in front of him and pushed open a door which was ajar; then Kitty gave a little shriek and fell back, but too late. Mrs. Blencarrow, in all her splendour for the ball, was standing before the fire. It was a plainly-furnished room, with a large writing-table in it, and shelves containing account books and papers—the business-room, where nobody except the tenants and the workpeople ever came in. To see her standing there, with all her diamonds flashing in the dimness, was the strangest sight.

‘Who is there?’ she cried, with an angry voice; then, ‘Kitty! What are you doing here?’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Blencarrow. We did not know what room it was. We couldn’t find a cool place. Indeed,’ said Kitty, recovering her courage, ‘we couldn’t find a place at all, there is such a crowd—and we thought the house was all open to-night, and that we might come downstairs.’

Mrs. Blencarrow looked at them both with the fullest straight look of those eyes, whose candour was sometimes thought to mean defiance. ‘I think,’ she said, ‘that though the house is all open to-night, Walter and you should not make yourselves remarkable by stealing away together. I ought, perhaps, to tell your mother.’

‘Oh, don’t, Mrs. Blencarrow!’

‘It is very foolish of you both.’

‘It was my fault, Mrs. Blencarrow. Don’t let Kitty be blamed. I remembered the old way into the garden.’

‘I hope you did not intend to go into the garden this cold night. Run upstairs at once, you foolish children!’ She hesitated a moment, and then said, with one of her sudden blushes dyeing her countenance: ‘I have got a bad headache; the music is a little too loud. I came down here for a moment’s quiet, and to get some eau de Cologne.’

‘Dear Mrs. Blencarrow,’ cried Kitty, too much unnerved for the moment to make any comments upon the lady’s look or manner, ‘don’t please say anything to mamma.’

Mrs. Blencarrow shook her head at them, looking from one to another, which meant gentle reproof of their foolishness, but then nodded an assent to Kitty’s prayer. But she pointed to the door at the same time, rather impatiently, as if she wanted to be rid of them; and, glad to escape so easily, they hastened away. Kitty felt the relief of having escaped so strongly that she never even asked herself why Mrs. Blencarrow should come down to the business-room in the middle of a ball, or if that was a likely place to find eau de Cologne. She thought of nothing (for the moment) but that she had got off rather well from what might have been an embarrassing situation.

‘I don’t think she’ll tell on us,’ Kitty said, with a long-drawn breath.

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