

**THE RAILWAY MAN
AND HIS CHILDREN**

BY
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VOLUME I.

CHAPTER I.

THE news that Miss Ferrars was going to marry Mr. Rowland the engineer, ran through the station like wildfire, producing a commotion and excitement which had rarely been equalled since the time of the Mutiny. Miss Ferrars! and Mr. Rowland!—it was repeated in every tone of wonder and astonishment, with as many audible notes of admiration and interrogation as would fill a whole page. “Impossible!” people said, “I don’t believe it for a moment”—“You don’t mean to say——” But when Mrs. Stanhope, who was Miss Ferrars’ friend, with whom she had been living, answered calmly that this was indeed what she meant to say, and that she was not very sure whether she was most sorry or glad—most pleased to think that her friend was thus comfortably established in life, or sorry that she was perhaps stepping a little out of her sphere—there remained nothing for her visitors but a universal gape of amazement, a murmur of deprecation or regret—“Oh, poor Miss Ferrars!” the ladies cried. “A lady, of such a good family, and marrying a man who was certainly not a gentleman.” “But he is a very good fellow,” the gentlemen said; and one or two of the mothers who were conscious in their hearts, though they did not say anything of the fact, that had he proposed for Edie or Ethel, they would have pushed his claims as far as legitimate pressure could go, held their tongues or said little, with a feeling that they had themselves escaped the criticism which was now so freely poured forth. They were aware indeed that it would have come upon them more hotly, for it was they who would have been blamed in the case of Ethel or Edie, whereas Miss Ferrars was responsible for herself. But the one of them who would have been

most guilty, and who indeed had thought a good deal about Mr. Rowland, and considered the question very closely whether she ought not as a matter of duty to endeavour to interest him in her Ethel, whose name was Dorothy, took up the matter most hotly, and declared that she could not imagine how a lady could make up her mind to such a descent “Not a gentleman: why, he does not even pretend to be a gentleman,” said the lady, as if the pretention would have been something in his favour. “He is not a man even of any education. Oh I know he can read and write and do figures—all those surveyor men can. Yes, I call him a surveyor—I don’t call him an engineer. What was he to begin with? Why he came out in charge of some machinery or something! None of them have any right to call themselves engineers. I call them all surveyors—working men—that sort of thing! and to think that a woman who really is a lady—”

“Oh come, Maria, come!” cried her husband, “you are glad enough of the P.W.D. when you have no bigger fish on hand.”

“I don’t understand what you mean by bigger fish, Colonel Mitchell,” said the lady indignantly; but if she did not know, all the rest of the audience did. Matchmaking mothers are very common in fiction, but more rare in actual life, and when one exists she is speedily seen through, and her wiles are generally the amusement of her circle, though the woman remains unconscious of this. And indeed poor Mrs. Mitchell was not so bad as she was supposed to be. She was a great entertainer, getting up parties of all kinds, which was the natural impulse of a fussy but not unkindly personality, delighting to be in the midst of everything; and it is certain that picnics and even dinner parties, much less dances, cannot be managed unless you keep up your supply of young men. There were times when her eagerness to keep up that supply and to

assure its regularity was put down quite wrongly to the score of her daughters, which is an injustice which every hospitable woman with daughters must submit to. A sort of half audible titter went round the little party when Colonel Mitchell, with that cruel satisfaction so often seen in men, gave over his wife to the criticism of society. A man never stands by the women of his family in such circumstances; he deserts them even when he does not, as in this instance, actually betray. There was one young man, however, one of the staff of dancers and picnic men, who was faithful to her—a poor young fellow who knew that he had no chance of being looked upon as a *parti*, and who made a diversion in pure gratitude, a quality greatly lacking among his kind.

“Rowland,” he said, “is one of the best fellows in the world. He does not shine perhaps among ladies, but he’s good fun when he likes, and a capital companion.”

“And Miss Ferrars, dear,” said one of the ladies soothingly, “is not like my Ethel or your Dorothy. Poor thing, it is just as well, for she has nobody to look after her: she is, to say the least, old enough to manage matters for herself.”

“And to know that such a chance would never come again,” said one of the men with a laugh—which is a kind of speech that jars upon women, though they may perhaps say something very like it themselves. But to think of Miss Ferrars making a last clutch of desperation at James Rowland the engineer, as at a chance which might never occur again, was too much even for an afternoon company making a social meal upon a victim, and there was a feeling of compunction and something like guilt when some one whispered almost with awe, “Look! there they are.”

The party in question were seated in a verandah in the cool of the day when the sun was out of sight. They had all been gasping in semi-darkness through the heat, and now had come to life again to enjoy a little gossip, before entering upon the real business of dining and the amusements of the evening. The ladies sat up in their chairs, and the men put themselves at least in a moral attitude of attention as the two figures went slowly across the square. One feels a little “caught” in spite of oneself by the sudden appearance of a person who has been under discussion at the moment he or she appears. There is a guilty sense that walls have ears, and that a bird of the air may carry the matter. It was a relief to everybody when the pair had passed and were seen no more. They went slowly, for the lady had a couple of little children clinging to her hands.

Miss Ferrars was of an appearance not to be passed over, even though she was quite old enough, as her critic said, to manage matters for herself—so old as to have no prospect of another chance did she reject the one unexpectedly offered to her at present. She was a woman a little more than the ordinary height, and a little less than the ordinary breadth—a slim, tall woman, with a very pliant figure, which when she was young had lent itself to all kinds of poetical similes. But she was no longer young. She must have been forty at the least, and she was not without the disadvantages that belong to that age. She did not look younger than she was. Her complexion had faded, and her hair had been touched, not to that premature whiteness which softens and beautifies, but to an iron grey, which is apt to give a certain sternness to the face. That there was no sternness about her, it was only necessary to see her attitude with the children, who clung to her and swayed her about, now to one side now to the other, with the restless tyranny peculiar to their age, while still she endeavoured to give her attention and a

smile to the middle-aged person by her side, who, truth to tell, was by no means so patient of the children's presence as she was. It was the little boy, who was next to Mr. Rowland, and who kicked his legs and got in the way of his footsteps, that brought that colour of anger to his face, and many exclamations which had to be repressed to his lips. Those dreadful little Stanhopes! Miss Ferrars had been by way of paying a visit to the friend of her childhood, and it was very kind, everybody said, of Mrs. Stanhope to stretch such a point for a friend, and to keep her so long. But there were many who knew very well what Evelyn Ferrars had not said even to herself, that she was the most useful member of the Stanhope household, doing everything for the children, though not a word was said of any such duties as those which had insensibly been thrown upon her. Nobody breathed such a word as governess in respect to Mrs. Stanhope's friend: but people have eyes, and uncommonly sharp ones sometimes at an Indian station, and everybody knew perfectly to what that long visit had come.

Mr. Rowland was a man of another order altogether. He was not tall, and he was rather broad—a ruddy weatherbeaten man, much shone upon by the sun, and blown about by all the winds. It was not difficult to see at a glance the difference between the two, which the critics in Colonel Mitchell's verandah had pointed out so fully. He was dressed as well as the gentlemen of the station, and had an air of prosperity and wealth which was not often to be seen in the lean countenances of the soldiers; but he was not like them. He was respectable beyond words, well off, a sensible, responsible man: but he was not what is called a gentleman in common parlance. You may say that he was much better, being a good and upright and honest man; but after all that is but a begging of the question, for he might have been all these things and yet a

gentleman, and this would have been in every way of the greatest advantage to him. It would have done him good with the young men under him, and even with the overseers and foremen of his works, as well as with the handful of people who made society in the station. Fortunately, however, he was not himself conscious of this deficiency, or if he was, accepted it as a matter of fact that did no real harm. He did not, as Mrs. Mitchell said, even pretend to be a gentleman. As he walked along by the side of the lady who had accepted him as her future husband, a great satisfaction betrayed itself in every look and movement. His face was lighted up with a sort of illumination as he turned it towards her—not the transport of a young man, or the radiance of that love-look which makes the most homely countenance almost beautiful, for he was perhaps beyond the age for such exaltation of sentiment; but a profound satisfaction and content which seemed to breathe out from him, surrounding him with an atmosphere of his own. Perhaps there was not the same expression upon the face of his betrothed. It is true that she was disturbed by the children, who hung upon her, dragging her now in one direction now in another; but at least her face was quietly serene, untroubled—peaceful if not glad.

This was the story of their wooing. Mr. Rowland, though he was not looked upon by the Society of the station as quite their equal, was yet invited everywhere, dining with everybody: and was treated with the utmost hospitality, so that no one could have suspected that any suspicion as to his worthiness was in the minds of these friendly people whom such a sudden event as this threatened marriage had moved to discussion of the claim to be one of them, which indeed he had never made, but which they had all awarded in that ease of social arrangement which herds together a little masterful alien community in the midst of that vast

continent peopled by races so different. To be an Englishman is of itself in India a social grade, and thus Mr. Rowland the engineer had many opportunities of seeing Mrs. Stanhope's friend, both in Mrs. Stanhope's house and the houses of the other magnates of the station. He had met her at all the entertainments given, and they were many, and he had almost immediately singled her out, not because of her beauty nor of the dependent position which touches the heart of some men, nor indeed for any reason in particular, except that he did single her out. Such an attraction is its own sole reason and explanation. It was not even choice, but simple destiny, which made him feel that here, by God's grace, was the one woman for him. I do not deny that when this middle-aged and perfectly honest and straightforward man asked her to marry him, Evelyn Ferrars was taken very much by surprise. She opened wide a pair of brown eyes which had not been without note in their day, but which had long ceased to expect any homage, and looked at him as if for the moment she thought him out of his senses. Did he know what he was saying—did he by any strange chance mean it? She looked at him with scarcely a blush, so great was her surprise, making these inquiries with her startled eyes; and there can be no doubt that her first impulse was to say no. But before she said it a sudden train of thought darted out from her mind, one crowding after the other an endless succession of ideas and reflections, presented to her in the twinkling of an eye, as if they had been a line of soldiers on the march. And she paused. He was scarcely aware of the hesitation, and resumed again after that moment of silence, pleading his own cause, very modestly yet very earnestly, with a seriousness and soberness which were much more effectual than greater enthusiasm would have been. But by this time she was scarcely aware what he said; it was her own mind that had come into action, saying to her a hundred things more potent than what

he was saying, and changing in a moment all the tenor of her thoughts. Evelyn was not perhaps much more of a free agent than Rowland was in this moment of fate. She felt afterwards that she had been stopped and her attention attracted as by the flash of one of those sun-signals of which she had been hearing. She was altogether in a military atmosphere in the Stanhopes' house, and everybody had been explaining that process by which the sun's rays are made to communicate messages from one distant army to another. She was stopped with the no on her lips by the flash and radiation through the air of that message. She had not any code of interpretation to note in a moment what it meant. But she paused, almost to her own astonishment; and when she found her voice, it was to ask for a little time to think before she gave her final reply.

When a woman does this, it is almost invariably the case that she decides for the suitor, even the doubt being, I suppose, a point in his favour, and increasing a disposition—a bias towards him rather than away from him. Evelyn had, like most other Englishwomen, a lively and wholesome feeling that love alone justified marriage, and that any less motive was a desecration of that tremendous tie. It is an excellent thing for a race that this superstition should exist, and I am far from desiring to see any lower ground accepted as the basis of a connection upon which the purity and character of all other affections depend. But yet when reason is allowed time to speak, there are many other things which may be permitted to have a voice, and a woman may at least be allowed to take into consideration at forty, arguments which at twenty would be indignantly refused a hearing. What Evelyn Ferrars felt as she retired from that interview which had opened to her so many and such extraordinary new suggestions for thought, it is difficult to describe. She had become all at once a sort of

battlefield—to keep up the military simile—in which that “No,” which had been her first conception of the situation, stood like a force entrenched and on the defensive, somewhat sullen, holding fast upon the mere fact of its existence, emitting a dull roar of artillery now and then, while the attacking forces scoured the plain in endless evolution, pressing on and on. The first flash of the sun-signal, which she had not been at first able to interpret, turned out to mean a rapid identification of her own position, which was a thing she had not allowed herself to think of, while it was without remedy. It was not what she had anticipated when she ventured in her loneliness to come up country in answer to her friend’s warm invitation. She had come out to Calcutta with her brother, the last survivor of her family after the breaking up of home at her father’s death; and when he too died soon after, cut off by the sudden stroke which ends so many promising careers in India, the despair of the solitary woman left in a strange place with few friends and little money, and nobody to come to her help, had been almost without a gleam of light. And in that emergency the Stanhopes had been very kind. The wife had written imploring her heart-broken friend to come to her, offering her all that the affection of a sister could do to supply her loss; the husband had come, what was even more kind, to do what he could for her, and to take her, if she consented, home. They had been more than kind. There had been no alloy of interested motives in that first impulse of generous compassion. It was good to think how frank, how full, how affectionate it had been.

But—oh what a pity, what a pity, that these beautiful impulses and sincere moments of loving kindness should ever be shadowed by the cold shade of after-thoughts! From the moment when Mrs. Stanhope weeping received poor Evelyn into her arms, and

lavished upon her the caresses and endearments of the most devoted friendship, to that in which Miss Ferrars became the unpaid governess, the useful dependent, and at the same time a member of the family who was apt to be *de trop*, who was not wanted between husband and wife, who was always there and could not be kept to her schoolroom and out of the way as an ordinary governess would have been—was unfortunately not very long. And indeed it was nobody's fault. The consciousness that she was getting a great deal out of her friend, and that the tables were more or less turned, and it was Evelyn who was conferring the benefit, did not make it easier to Mrs. Stanhope to keep up the effusion and tenderness of the first welcome: and Captain Stanhope was often cross, troubled by harassments of his own, and wishing his wife's friend anywhere but where she was, notwithstanding the fact that her presence was "everything for the children." The situation had grown more and more strained, but there seemed no issue out of it: for it takes a great deal of money to take your passage from the centre of India to England, even when you know where to go and have your living assured when there. And Evelyn had nothing, neither a house to go to nor enough money for the journey. There were moments when she would have given anything in the world—which is a mere figure of speech, for she had nothing in the world to give—to be able to go away, and relieve her friends of her inconvenient presence; and there were moments when she felt that she was of too much use in the house to deprive them of her services, as if she grudged the expenditure. It was scarcely possible to imagine a position more painful and trying. It was nothing to her that her whole life was absorbed in the service of her friends and their children. Many women are able to make this kind of sacrifice and to stave off all thoughts of the future and what is to become of them after—with a heroic

obedience to the Gospel precept of taking no thought for the morrow. But that was not all. For she was at the same time, as she felt, an inconvenience to the very people for whom she was spending her strength: they wanted her very room for other uses. They did not want her constantly between them spoiling their *tête à tête*—always to be considered when there was company, and to be invited with them when they went out. The very children got to know that aunt Evelyn, as they called her, was *de trop* in the house, and yet could neither go nor be sent away.

And here suddenly was the opening of a door which made all things possible. When that mental heliograph flashed in her face, and she became aware of what it meant, Evelyn, for almost the first time, retired into her room and locked her door, and for a whole hour turned a deaf ear to the demands made upon her. The children came and called in every tone of impatience, Edith, the eldest, tap-tapping upon the closed door for ten minutes continuously, and little Bobby kicking, to the great derangement of the thoughts going on within; but for the first and only time Evelyn held fast. She had plenty to do in that house, more than ever she had done before in her life. In the previous crises of that existence it had been other people who had done the thinking, and there had been little left for her but to submit. Now, however, the matter was in her hands, and no one else could help her. It was hard work getting her head clear enough to put this and that together; for the mere idea of marriage was very startling and indeed terrifying to the middle-aged woman who had put it out of all her calculations years ago, and who had retained merely the old youthful superstition that its only warrant was love. But was that really so? After all it was not so simple a thing that it could be thus dismissed and classified. It was a very complicated thing and involved many duties. It was

not merely an emotional matter, but one full of practical necessities and exertions. To be a true and helpful companion through all the chances of life: to govern a household: to secure comfort and peace of mind and consolation in all circumstances and occurrences for the partner of life: to care for him and his interests as nobody else could do: to adopt his obligations and help him to serve God and to serve men—Evelyn Ferrars felt that she was capable of all that. It was a worthy office to fulfil, and it was surely the chief part. As for the other side it was undeniable that she shrank from it a little. But he was not young any more than herself. The hour was scarcely over when Mrs. Stanhope herself appeared at the door, half with the air of a mistress who has a right to all her retainer's time, and half with that of a friend anxious to know what was the matter.

“The children tell me they cannot make you hear,” she said. “I came myself to see if you were ill, or if anything is wrong.”

“You have come just when I wanted you,” said Evelyn, “if I may shut the door on the children for ten minutes more. Helen, something very wonderful has happened, and I have been trying to think what I must do.”

“What has happened?” said Mrs. Stanhope in alarm.

“Mr. Rowland has asked me to—to marry him,” said Evelyn. She did not blush as women do, even when their feelings are but little stirred. She was too anxious to learn what her friend's verdict would be.

Mrs. Stanhope uttered a cry, and rising up hastily, caught Evelyn in her arms. “Oh,” she said, “I shall lose you, Eve!” The words and the embrace were full of compunction, of kindness, and remorse; but Evelyn felt the relief, the thankfulness, that suddenly

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